

**‘Behind Camp David’  
Speech by Prime Minister Menachem Begin  
(Three Days after Camp David Signing)  
September 20, 1978  
Americana Hotel, New York City  
Before the Conference of Presidents  
of Major American Jewish Organizations**

[Note: The following is a transcript of an address by the Hon. Menachem Begin on Sept. 20, 1978--only three days after the historic Camp David Accords were signed with Egypt.

The speech was given before an audience of about 2,000 American Jewish leaders and guests of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations in the grand ballroom of the Americana Hotel, New York.

This rare recording was found by my father, Rabbi Avram J. Twersky of the Bronx, N.Y., from among his books and tapes. The discovery was made, ironically, only days after Begin's death in March 1992. The recording has since been presented to the Menachem Begin Heritage Center, which is currently under construction in Jerusalem. I am in possession of this recording.—  
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Mr. Chairman, the Ambassadors of Israel, members of the dais, ladies and gentlemen, my brethren:

We bring you from Camp David a peace agreement with security and with honor.  
(APPLAUSE)

The framework we signed--concerning the bi-lateral relations between the State of Israel and Egypt—is actually a peace treaty. In that framework we have solved 98% of the issues, which will be included in the peace treaty.

There is one outstanding problem, and that concerns the settlements in northern and southern Sinai, which were built for the last 10 years by my predecessors. I praise them for the decision to have built those settlements. It was no caprice and no attempt to take land from anybody else. They did it with prudence and understanding of the most vital issues of Israel’s national security.

We want security not only for our generation, which suffered much and fought, and with God’s help won the day. We care for our children and our children’s children, for all generations to come, because after the destruction of our two temples and two states, never again should there be a destruction of a Jewish state.

(APPLAUSE)

However, it became a problem in the negotiations for a peace treaty between us and Egypt. And I explained to the President of the United States, that the Foreign Minister, the Defense Minister, and myself, are not empowered and not entitled to give any commitment on this issue, because it is the policy which was approved by our democratic Parliament that those settlements should stay. And therefore, the one thing we can do is to bring it back to Jerusalem, place it before our Parliament, and let Parliament decide.

We also took the serious decision on this issue to give the members of Parliament a completely free vote—without any Party discipline or any attempt of coercion. Every member of the 120 members of our Knesset will vote in accordance with his own conscience. It will be a free vote. But if it should be a

free vote, we will not allow any foreign pressure to be exerted on the Knesset of Israel.

(APPLAUSE)

Nobody in the world is entitled to tell our 120 elected representatives in the legislature of Israel that 'if they do not vote as he would like,' then there won't be negotiations for peace. That would mean illegitimate pressure on the consciences of our Legislature. It is absolutely intolerable. What kind of a free vote would it be?

We shall abide by the decision of the Knesset—whatever it is. I am a servant of the Knesset—not its ruler. I have the honor to be a Prime Minister of a free and democratic state under a parliamentary regime.

(APPLAUSE)

But it won't be any reason not to start negotiations. Under any circumstances or outcome of the vote, because in any case, we suggest that that issue, too, should come up during the negotiations for peace treaties. And we have the experience at Camp David of 12 days and 12 nights that when you rack your brains, when you make an intellectual effort, any problem—even that that seems to be insoluble, can find a solution.

Therefore, the question will be brought before the Knesset during the next fortnight. Whatever the Knesset decides, we shall carry out. And we shall stand by the negotiations for the conclusion of the peace treaty between Israel and Egypt—the foundation for that peace treaty having been laid already at Camp David.

Concerning Judea, Samaria and the Gaza District:

We have also signed a very serious agreement.

Yes, it is based on our peace proposal. And at Camp David I could have heard from my friend, the President of the United States, a statement that made me both sad and happy, to the effect: "The world did not appreciate enough your peace proposal, brought to Washington and Ismailia in December, last year."

Admittedly, we had some difficult days, and even months, since March this year, until last month. But we are used to it. Everything which we lived through for the last 40 years perhaps was a preparation for these days. To steel our character. To make sure that we do not bow to pressure. That we can also survive some name-calling. "*Meilah.*"

Now, on the basis of our peace plan, the agreement says that the Palestinian Arabs residing in Judea, Samaria and the Gaza District will have autonomy. Full autonomy. They will themselves select their administrative council. And 11 departments. And deal themselves with the daily affairs of their lives. We shall not interfere. They will have self-rule, as we believe it is just that they should have. And we, the Palestinian Jews, will have security. As we believe it is indispensable justice that they should enjoy it.

As a result, I hereby declare, that the Israeli Defence Forces will stay in Judea, Samaria and the Gaza Strip to defend our people and to make sure that Jewish blood is not shed again by our implacable enemies. [APPLAUSE]

And if anybody, if an unknown spokesman of the State Department ever made a declaration to the effect that the agreement means that our Defence Forces will stay in Judea, Samaria and the Gaza District only for 5 years, I hereby declare they will stay beyond five years.

(APPLAUSE)

About such a statement Churchill used to say that it is: "A terminological inexactitude"

{LAUGHTER}

Or, to put it simply, our Defence Forces will stay in Judea, Samaria and the Gaza District. There will be autonomy for our neighbors, there will be security for us, there will be peace for them—and for us.

(APPLAUSE)

This is the reason why, since the first Egyptian document that was produced during the talks between President Carter, President Sadat and myself, a problem arose which could have made the agreement impossible.

We were asked to sign a document, in which at least four times the words appeared: "the inadmissibility of the acquisition of territory by war." And unfortunately, those same words appeared also in the American document produced to us. We tried to plead with the Egyptians, and mainly, with our American friends. We explained to them that these words are taken from the preamble to Resolution 242 of the United Nations Security Council of November 1967. Under international law a preamble is not an integral part of the resolution itself. It does not have binding force. Therefore it stands separately as a doctrine. If it is a doctrine, it must mean a war of aggression. The aggressor must never get away with the spoils. But, if it is a war of legitimate national self-defense, this is the Golden Rule under international law, then territorial changes are not only permissible, but necessary.

(APPLAUSE)

Otherwise, every aggressor will not only commit, but also repeat, these aggressions. What is he going to lose? If he wins his aggressive war, he gets his spoils. If he loses, he gets back what he lost. This is simple “*seichel*”—not only law.

And as you do not add, we told our friends, the word ‘aggression,’ what does that preamble mean in relation and in connection with the Six Day War, which was thrust upon us--as three Presidents of the United States of America wrote to us since the days of June 1967. We were then threatened with extinction. There were slogans in Cairo and in Damascus and in Rabat Amman and in Baghdad to the effect: “Throw them into the sea! Cut them down! Kill them! Destroy them!” Military orders included a passage calling for the physical destruction of the civilian population of any town which the invading armies may conquer.

We faced another Holocaust, ladies and gentlemen. Surrounded on all sides by overwhelming forces. By thousands of Soviet-supplied tanks; hundreds of first-line combat planes; hundreds of thousands of soldiers.

With God’s help, we repelled all of them. They did not win their night; we won the day.

(APPLAUSE)

And now you ask us to sign a document with those false and falsifying words: “inadmissibility of the acquisition of territory,” as a result of such a war, of legitimate self-defense, of saving a nation surrounded and attacked and threatened with annihilation? All those arguments did not convince our friends. And time and again for eight days—since Wednesday—we heard from our American friends, that if that phrase is not included in the document, no agreement is possible. And therefore, as they time and again told us, “we are called upon to sign a document including that commitment.”

We refused. On behalf of the People of Israel, on behalf of the Jewish People, in the name of simple of human justice and dignity, above all, on behalf of truth, we refused to give this signature for those words.

(SUSTAINED APPLAUSE)

Ultimately, a talk took place between the President and myself on Wednesday night, the eighth day of our deliberations. I asked the President to lend me an attentive ear. I told him: “It is going to be, Mr. President, one of the most serious

talks I have ever held with you since we met in July last year in the White House, and perhaps, I have ever held with anybody on earth.”

And this is what I told him:

“Mr. President: Sinai. Do we ask for one square kilometer of Sinai? Didn’t we produce a peace plan in accordance with which all the peninsula will go to Egypt? We take great risks. When we evacuate Sinai, ultimately, after two or three years, with all the security arrangements already agreed in the framework for peace, we still take great risks.

“In Ismailia I asked General Gamazi, the Commander-in-Chief of the Egyptian Army, ‘How much time will it take to move your army to the international boundary, as you have now already part of your army on this side of the Suez Canal?’ He consulted with one of his officers and gave me the following sincere reply: ‘Seven hours.’

“When we evacuate Sinai there won’t be one Israeli soldier, or one Israeli tank, between that Egyptian Army on this side of the Suez Canal, and on the other, to stop them. And in seven hours they can be on our Southern border and threaten the civilian population of our country.

[BEGIN TURNS TO THE AUDIENCE:] You may be quiet. It won’t happen. If they try, *ich bin zey nit m’kaneh*”—[translation: “I don’t envy them.”]

(SUSTAINED APPLAUSE)

However, this is the objective situation. Seven hours! Yes, it is a risk. I take it for the sake of peace. And we don’t ask for ourselves even one square kilometer of territory of the Sinai.

“Judea and Samaria and the Gaza District. We suggest autonomy. We don’t ask now for one square kilometer to be put under our sovereignty. Yes, Mr. President, we the Jewish People, as of right, have a claim to sovereignty over Judea, Samaria and the Gaza District.

(APPLAUSE)

“There are some people who make a mockery of the Bible. Let them make a mockery of themselves.”

(APPLAUSE)

“The Bible is a living document--eternally living document.

(APPLAUSE)

“We live on this Book, with this Book—forever.

“And aptly expressed himself, my predecessor, of blessed memory, the late Mr. Ben-Gurion, said, ‘Some people say that the British Mandate is our Bible. It is untrue,’ he said. ‘The Bible is our mandate!’

(APPLAUSE)

“Yes, Judea, Samaria and the Gaza Strip are integral parts of Eretz Yisrael—the land of our forefathers, which we have never forgotten during exile, when we were a persecuted minority, humiliated, killed, our blood shed, burned alive. We always remembered Zion, and Zion means Eretz Israel. It is our land as of right.

“Now, we don’t ask even for one square kilometer. We leave the question of sovereignty open, because we want peace. Ours is the right and the claim. We know there are other claims. If they rival amongst themselves; if they collide with each other, we can’t have an agreement, and then there won’t be peace.

“Therefore we racked our brains and we wounded our hearts, and we found a way. Let the question of sovereignty be left open. And let us deal with the human beings. With the peoples on both sides. Let us give the Palestinian Arabs autonomy and the Palestinian Jews security, and we shall live together in human dignity, in equality of rights, in human progress. There will be justice. And we shall together advance.

(APPLAUSE)

“So, if we don’t—in connection with the two subject matters which are now being negotiated at Camp David—ask even for one square kilometer, either in Sinai or in Judea, Samaria and the Gaza Strip, where is ‘acquisition of territory?’ What relevance have those words ‘unjust’ in connection with the Six Day War to what we are doing at Camp David?”

I concluded this passage of my words to the President of the United States with a simple statement, taken, yes indeed, from the Bible.

And I told him:

“Mr. President: Let my right hand forget its cunning before I sign such a document.”

(SUSTAINED APPLAUSE)

Yesterday the President asked me to give him the Hebrew quotation of what I told him in St. James' translation. I gave it to him. [AUDIENCE LAUGHTER]. I gave it to him.

And the original is: "tishcach yemini. Im eshcachech Yerushalayim. Tidbak leshoni l'chiki im lo ezkrechi. Im lo a'a'leh et Yerushalayim al rosh simchati."

The President got convinced. And then he went to President Sadat and convinced him that we cannot sign any document in which those irrelevant words will appear. Because, should we have signed them, that would be surrender to a subterfuge. They wanted us to give a commitment that we shall leave the Golan Heights—"inadmissibility of the acquisition of territory by war" –and we shall descend into the valley—ten meters from the Genazerath link to the east. And then the Syrians would shell with their Soviet-supplied artillery every Moshav and every Kibbutz in the Valley. And this time even be able to reach Haifa.

It won't happen, ladies and gentlemen.

(APPLAUSE)

And they wanted us to give them a commitment a-priori, before even one of the five years passes, that we shall relinquish, completely, Judea, Samaria and the Gaza District, and not only give up our paternal heritage, our inherent right, the Land of our prophets and of our kings, the Land of our fathers and of our children, but also the most vital demands of our national security.

Then we would be here, down in the Valley. They would be here, up on the Mountain. We would be nine miles from the seashore, in Hebrew in the double meaning of the expression, "Kol ir v'em b'Yisrael (Every city and mother in Israel), would be in the range of the fire of the most implacable, most barbaric enemy of the Jewish People since the days of the Nazis.

Then there wouldn't be peace. There would be permanent bloodshed and ultimately a general war under the harshest conditions ever imagined by any human being.

Can such a situation be tolerated? Can such conditions be restored? Our Parliament in the range of enemy's fire? Jerusalem taken into crossfire by Bethlehem in the South and by Ir Bira in the North? Every man, every woman, every Jewish child in direct danger of being maimed or killed? Could we agree, can we agree, to such injustice?

May I say to you a simple word. Never.

(SUSTAINED APPLAUSE)

And therefore, I couldn't have given a commitment about "inadmissibility" etc., taking into consideration our future, our security, the lives of our children.

Ultimately, that passage was deleted from the document and then we could go on with our negotiations.

My brethren:

We stand now at a crossroads. Not everything was solved. Much was achieved. We had difficult times. We were wronged, and some trembling knees started to tremble several months ago. There were some sunshine soldiers in our ranks, who left us at the first difficulties we faced. No recriminations.

Yes, it is written in our Torah about a man who has got a soft or a weak heart. Let him go home, and let him not influence other people with the softness or the weakness of his heart. No recriminations. But the lesson we have to draw, today as well: We have a great achievement. We want peace. We pray for it, we yearn for it.

When the People of Israel elected my colleagues and myself to serve them in the government, some people—there and here—immediately said "That means war!" "The following day there will be war!"

What a mistaken concept.

Men who fought in the underground for liberation hate war. More than anything else in life, sometimes you have to fight, otherwise you will not be a human being. As it was proved in the 40's in Europe. Only when the remnants took up some arms and fought they became human beings. Until that time they were hunted animals. By cruel animals.

You fight for liberation. What new is it to you, American citizens? But a fighter for liberation hates war! And it is true that I dream about peace in Israel—between Israel and all her Arab neighbors—not since the 17<sup>th</sup> of May 1977. Not since June 1967. But since November 1947, because until then, five years passed when no Arab ever raised his hand on even on one Jew, or vice versa. And we, from the Underground, fought for the liberation of Palestine, our land, to save our people from the danger of utter destruction and complete annihilation and to live with the Arab neighbors as I learned from my master and teacher Zeev Jabotinsky (INTERRUPTED BY APPLAUSE) in respect, in human dignity, in equality of rights, in autonomy.

We wanted peace for the last 35 years! It never came. Now we have a breakthrough. We may have peace. We hope it will come. There are still problems to be solved. Hurdles to be overcome. For those days—the good ones

and the difficult ones—having learned the lesson what happened since March until last month.

This is my appeal to you. Always, under any circumstances, let us stand together. Always together.

(SUSTAINED APPLAUSE)

Then the difficult days will pass. Darkness will disappear, light will come, joy will arise, peace will be achieved, better days will come.

But as I spoke about those who got cold feet at the first difficulty, I would like to mention a few people who stood with us in the most difficult days.

I only mention a few—the others whom I do not mention will forgive me because it could be a very long list and my time is limited.

Ladies and gentlemen, I want to express our deep gratitude to Alex Schindler.

(SUSTAINED APPLAUSE)

He stood with us at the most difficult days. Never bowed his head and spoke to the mighty as a proud Jew.

I want to thank Ted Mann for his attitude.

(APPLAUSE)

I want to express our gratitude to a man whom I do not see. I don't know whether he is in the hall. To Rabbi {Fabian} Shoenfeld. A sage (INTERRUPTED BY APPLAUSE) who never flinched. (APPLAUSE).

And I want to thank a man you all know--who is probably not here—of strong character. I want to thank Max Fisher.

And I want to express gratitude to all the others whom I cannot now mention by their names, who stood with us with civil courage. A great military French commander said: "To show civil courage is more difficult than military courage."

It is so.

Never doubted us. Never wrote letters to us or against us. Never tried to find favor with the mighty ones against the few—although not the weak ones. Those last nine months were quite an experience for all of us. And they taught us a

lesson for all the years to come: Jews are a great People. Tempered in suffering, experienced in resistance, proud with their heritage. And if they stand together, if there is “achdut yisrael v’ahavat Yisrael v’ahavat chinam,” no enemy will get the upper hand against them.”

(APPLAUSE)

So today we shall rededicate ourselves to this goal,. Let us do our duty. Let us rejoice in our achievements. I call upon you, when you go back to your kehilot, that you should redouble and treble your efforts to solve the problem of intolerable poverty of 10 percent of the people of Israel.

May I issue a personal appeal to you—it is always on my conscience day and night—to know that 300,000 Jewish people live in the most abject conditions—a people who was commanded at the dawn of history: “Tzedek tzedek tirdof (Justice, Justice, thou shalt pursue).”

Make an effort so that after three years, with God’s help, when I step down, I’ll be able to say ‘My friends and I brought peace to Israel and liquidated poverty in Israel.’

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