

Like an angel AMONG MEN



Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin delivers an address upon his arrival in the US for a state visit.

Menachem Begin lived by the maxim that a Jew should never hate another Jew and, the truth is, we all should live by that adage | BY ROBERT SUSSMAN

WE HAVE CERTAIN COMMANDMENTS THAT ARE bein adam l'chaveiro, between man and his fellow man: to love our fellow as we love ourselves; not to hate our fellow; not to bear a grudge against him; not to take revenge against him.¹ These aren't easy mitzvot. In fact, I once gave a series of shiurim regarding them and one of the attendees turned to me and sincerely

queried whether these mitzvot were really possible to keep; sure these mitzvot sound fine in theory, but, in practice, can people really rise to such a lofty level, essentially living like angels among men? We know that Hashem doesn't command us in anything that we can't do, but I had nothing that I could point to in the way of an example for this man, someone

who this man could relate to and demonstrate that such behaviour was not beyond our reach.

Nothing, that is, until I came across a book called *The Prime Ministers* by Yehuda Avner (Toby Press 2010). If you haven't read it, it's a must read – a love letter to Menachem Begin. As I read that book, I knew that I had my proof. Avner details a campaign speech made by Begin in the first ever elections in Israel, in which Begin explained how he had managed to avoid Civil War between his Ir-gun and Ben-Gurion's Hagana:

"We were almost at each other's"

throats," [Begin] declared, "not only in the matter of the Altalena arms ship, but even before that, in nineteen forty-four, when the Irgun rose up in revolt against the British, in defiance of Ben-Gurion's command ... It was a year of unspeakable torment ... Our sisters and brothers in Europe were being slaughtered in the millions. But Ben-Gurion insisted we join the Allies in defeating the Nazis before rebelling to expel the British from our land. My colleagues and I thought otherwise. Ben-Gurion was so hostile to our revolt he tried to squash it by unleashing his Hagana men to round up our fighters and hand them over to the British. It was madness. It was tearing Jews apart. I could smell the stench of civil war ... So I told our men to go quietly, not to resist. It was extremely hard to order our men to restrain their natural instinct for revenge, but I had to do it. I had to do it, Ki Yehudim anachnu!" [Because we are Jews!] ... Oh yes, it was very hard. Yet our fighters understood my command and humbled their natural instinct for reprisal. They surrendered quietly, many of them to be transported to British detention camps in Er-

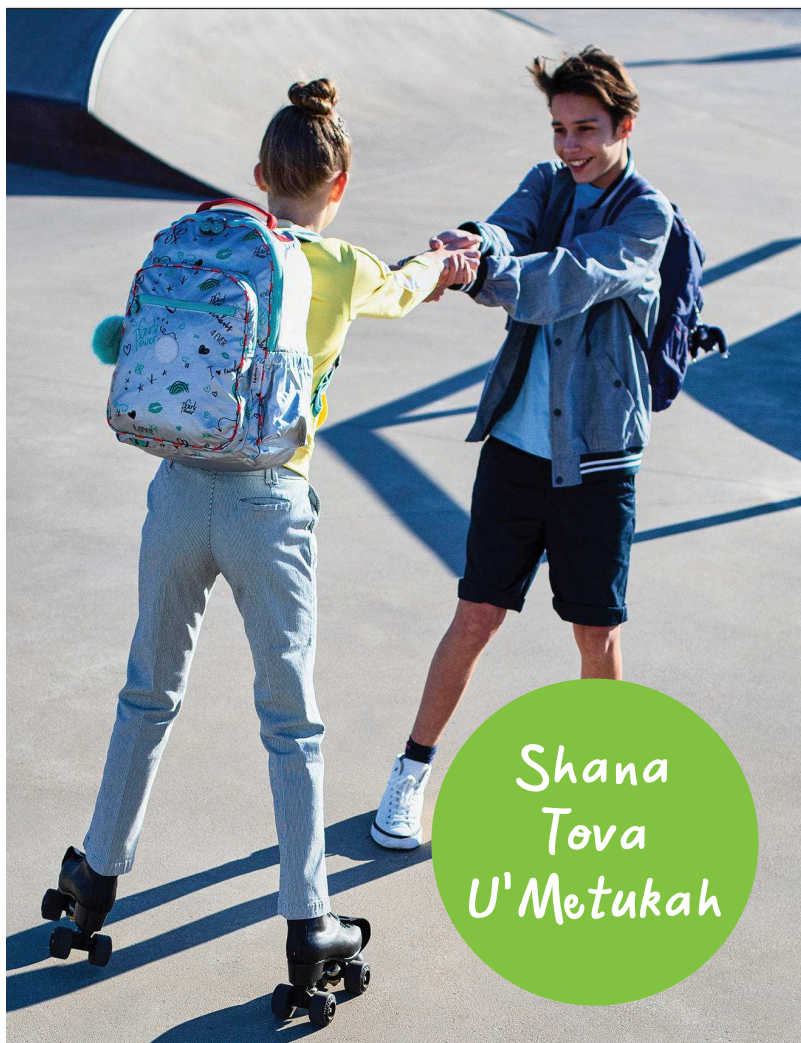
“NOW HEAR THIS EACH AND EVERY ONE OF YOU, AND HEAR IT WELL. I LIVE BY AN IRON RULE: A JEW MUST NEVER LIFT A FINGER AGAINST A FELLOW JEW, NEVER.”

itrea ... Our men were dismissed from their jobs. Their children were expelled from schools. Hagana men kidnapped our Irgun men. They were often treated grimly before being turned over to the British police. Lists of our members, officers, and rank-and-file were handed in by Jewish informers. There were daily roundups. Our arms caches and safe houses were exposed.”

“All the love of which the human heart is capable wells up within me as I recall our underground fighters, unflinching, fearless, moved by a supreme fighting spirit, and who, nevertheless, allowed themselves to be flung into detention camps, thrown into dark cellars, starved, beaten, and maligned. And not one of them” – he rose to his full height, his eyes fierce with pain – “NOT ONE OF THEM broke his solemn oath not to retaliate! From the depths of Jewish history came the order not to fight back, and it was obeyed to the very last

man.” He trumpeted this with a stab of the finger, his face as granite as his eyes, and the audience responded with another mighty wave of applause.

But then a sudden rigidity came over him, and his shoulders lifted in the manner of a soldier at a march: “Now hear this each and every one of you, and hear it well. I live by an iron rule: a Jew must never lift a finger against a fellow Jew, NEVER. A Jew must never shed the blood of another Jew, NEVER. Twenty centuries ago we faced the bitter experience of the destruction of our Second Temple, the destruction of our capital Jerusalem. And why? Because of our senseless hatred of each other, a hatred that led to civil war and to our utter ruin: ...generations of tears. And, therefore, I long ago took a solemn oath that no matter the provocation, no matter the circumstances, I would never ever be a party to a civil war, NEVER!”



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The Altalena off Tel-Aviv beach

“EYE WITNESSES DESCRIBED MENACHEM BEGIN STANDING ON THE BURNING DECK [OF THE ALTALENA] LIKE SOME FIGURE IN A PARABLE, BLACK FROM THE ACRID SMOKE, FLINGING UP HIS ARMS AND YELLING FRANTICALLY TO HIS MEN, ‘DON’T SHOOT BACK! DON’T OPEN FIRE. NO CIVIL WAR!’”

He was standing ramrod straight, his face fearless, his hands balled, his voice choking with sincerity: “Do we not know from history what civil war does to a nation? Do we not know that generations pass before a nation at war with itself can ever heal? Therefore, I say to you tonight, a curse on him who preaches civil war. Let his hand be cut off before he raises it against another Jew. There will never be a civil war in Israel – NEVER!”

Avner continues...

In his speech that night [Begin] made no mention of what befell him personally on board the burning Altalena. Eye-witnesses told me about that much later on. They told me how a loudspeaker was rigged on the ship to enable Begin to address the many people lining the Tel Aviv beach, some watching the crippled ship, others firing at it.

“People of Tel Aviv,” Begin roared, “we of the Irgun have brought you arms to fight the enemy, but the Government is denying them to you.” And then, to the soldiers firing at him from the beach: “For G-d’s sake, help us unload these arms which are for our common defense. If there are differences among us, let us reason together.”

One of the people who heard him say this was Yitzhak Rabin, then deputy commander of the Palmach – the Hagana’s crack striking force ... “I honestly believed what Ben-Gurion was saying, that Begin was mounting a coup,” he would tell me years later. “So when ordered to take command of a Palmach unit and open fire, I did. There was a gun battery nearby, a very old cannon, unequipped with sights and

with a very slim chance of a direct hit. But clearly, this was no mere shelling to frighten off the people on board; it was meant to strike home. And strike home it did. The gun progressively zoned in on its target and the third shell hit it, setting the ship ablaze. And what a hit that was!” Eye witnesses described Menachem Begin standing on the burning deck like some figure in a parable, black from the acrid smoke, flinging up his arms and yelling frantically to his men, “Don’t shoot back! Don’t open fire. No civil war!”

As if this wasn’t enough to show us that it’s possible to keep these mitzvos, fast forward nearly 20 years and we’ll see even further proof. In 1967 – just before the start of the 6 Day War – Menachem Begin met with then Prime Minister, Levi Eshkol. Begin wanted Eshkol to step aside in favour of none other than the man whom logic would have dictated would have been Begin’s arch enemy, a man who had literally tried to kill him: David Ben-Gurion! Eshkol was naturally shocked:

“MENACHEM BEGIN WASN’T AN ANGEL. AND HE WASN’T ANY DIFFERENT THAN THE REST OF US.”

"But how can you, of all people, ask me to step aside in favor [sic] of the man who has abused you at every turn, tried to bring you down at every turn?" asked an astonished Eshkol... [Begin answered,] "I'm proposing you hand over the reins of government to Ben-Gurion and become his deputy in a national unity government. I have the highest regard for you personally, but I think the situation is so grave and your responsibilities so heavy, you cannot carry the burden on your shoulders. I am firmly of the belief that Ben-Gurion has to lead the nation in this hour of peril. He is a war leader."

Eshkol shot him a sharp look, and there followed a brittle silence which was broken when he snapped, "Impossible! Ben-Gurion is eighty-one."

"True, but I say again, he's a tried and tested war leader."

The Prime Minister, hurt to the core, stared upwards, studying the ceiling, trying to take it all in. Finally, he shot back, "You are asking me to do this after all Ben-Gurion has done and said about you over all these years? He's even compared you to Hitler."

So what would we expect Begin to respond? Something along the lines of: "You're right. I hate him to my core. I can't stand the man. But, I'm a big enough person to put the needs of our people first."

Nothing of the kind. Begin told Eshkol in no uncertain terms:

"The enmity is his, not mine. I live by the maxim that a Jew should never hate another Jew."

As an attorney, it was probably the strongest case that I'd ever made. I don't think there was a dry eye in the room when I gave this over one Shabbos morning and, in true South African spirit, every single person present came up to tell me how much they enjoyed it, the men shaking my hand vigorously as they did so.

But what admittedly nagged at me was the fact that Begin did seem super human – like an angel among men. And maybe he was just born of a temperament that made all of this easier for him than it was for others, especially lesser humans like ourselves.

But, just recently, I saw a dvar Torah by Rabbi Shimshon Dovid Pincus² which

“EACH AND EVERY ONE OF US HAS A PURE AND HOLY SOUL INSIDE HIM, AND EACH AND EVERY ONE OF US CAN STRIVE TO LIVE JUST AS BEGIN DID.”

served to explain why Begin was able to rise to the occasion and, more importantly, why each of us has within us the very same potential to fulfil these very difficult mitzvos.

When the Torah says “don’t take revenge”, the intention is that if someone wrongs a person or causes him pain, that the person who was wronged will not repay the bad thing that was done to him. When the Torah says “don’t bear a grudge”, it means that the person who was wronged will also not remember in his heart the bad thing that was done to him. When the Torah says “love your neighbour as you love yourself”, it means that not only must you not take revenge against this person who did something bad to you or who insulted you, and not only must you uproot from your heart the memory of what he did to you, but also you must love him with a complete love, just like you love yourself!

These mitzvos – not taking revenge, not bearing a grudge, and loving your neighbour – appear logical when we speak about them, but when it comes to doing them, we encounter tremendous challenges and we need to be almost like an angel in order to fulfil them.

Regarding taking revenge and bearing a grudge, this includes our holding back from doing good to someone who did not want to do us good or that did something bad to us already; and bearing a grudge is remembering, at the time that we do good for someone who wronged us, this memory of the wrong that was done to us. The yetzer (evil inclination) boils the heart and constantly asks to leave at least some impression or some memory when bad things are done to us, and, if it's not possible for there to remain a large memory, the yetzer will strive that there should at least remain some small trace of a memory. On this, the Torah comes and says: Love your fellow as you love yourself – like you, without any differences, distinctions, or qualifications; truly like you.

Indeed, the Torah emphasises, “Love your neighbour like yourself.” “Your neighbour”, meaning the people who are closest to you, for example: your family and friends, and especially a husband or wife, because these mitzvos are twice as hard to fulfil towards those who are the closest to us, as the insults that come from them, even the slightest ones, hurt the most, like a fine needle that penetrates deep inside the flesh. And, the desire to take revenge, even a tiny bit of revenge, is very strong – as our Sages teach that revenge is sweeter than honey!

So, the Torah comes to emphasise and to inform us that the neshama (the soul) that's inside us is from the upper worlds and, consequently, it is within our power to be like lofty angels and to forgive, and even not to remember the wrongs and the insults that were done to us, and this is why the verse which states, “Don’t take revenge, don’t bear a grudge against the members of your people, and love your neighbour as you love yourself,” – ends with the words, “I am Hashem” – because Hashem gives us the power to stand firm in this if we choose to do so.

Menachem Begin wasn't an angel. And he wasn't any different than the rest of us. What made him special was the level to which he managed to succeed in this area – and the way that he worked on himself and the amazing love that he felt for every single Jew, including those who wronged him and even those who tried to kill him. Each and every one of us has a pure and holy soul inside him, and each and every one of us can strive to live just as Begin did and to live by the maxim that – no matter what – a Jew must never hate another Jew. **IL**

Dedicated to Reverend Brian Lurie (Ilui nishmas Dov Ber Nachum ben Eliyahu, a"h), who passed away in Durban on 23 June 2019.

¹Vayikra 19:17-18

²Nefesh Shimshon Vaykira (Kedoshim)