



# Torah and Western Thought: Jewish and Western Texts in Conversation

APRIL 2021

## *From Brisk to Jerusalem: The Triumph of Menachem Begin*

### We Were All Born in Jerusalem

BY MENACHEM BEGIN

TRANSLATED BY DR. NEIL ROGACHEVSKY AND MICHAEL WEINER

*The following excerpt is adapted from Dr. Rogachevsky and Michael Weiner's original translation which appeared in [Mosaic Magazine](#) in May 2020.*

*In 1972, Menachem Begin, then-leader of the opposition, spoke at a commemorative event for the martyred Jews of Brisk. Five years later he would become the country's prime minister.*

**When Ahad Ha'am wrote about Judaism in the West,** he ascertained with an eagle's gaze and profound insight that despite their external freedom—the ghetto had fallen, emancipation had arrived, everyone was equal—despite that freedom, there was enslavement.

For us [in Brisk] it was the opposite. Despite the slavery, we had freedom. Certainly, we had our share of slavery. We saw the drunks, heard their cries, the makeshift bombs, houses destroyed, Jewish students chased and beaten just because they were Jews. All of this we lived through, saw, and heard, but deep within us, in the midst of slavery, there was freedom. The Jews of Brisk were noble Jews.

[Zalman] Shneour could have written about the Jews of Brisk what he wrote about the Jews of his native Shklov. We did not bow our heads before the wicked masses. We stood facing them. Even when we were small and weak, we fought back in children's ways. To every insult we knew how to respond.

And the teamsters, who greeted you as you crossed the street, and the stagecoach drivers and the butchers and all the other working men could stand up against the pogromists and “strike them with a mighty blow.”

Of course, this was a people that lived this way and, in this way, defended its human dignity—so long as it was permitted to live. But they saw accurately that the situation of Jews in the West was slavery in the midst of freedom, while there [in Brisk] it was freedom in the midst of slavery.

And yet there too the innocence of Jewish existence found its expression. Even after all that has happened to us, we are still unable today to grasp the innocence that characterized our fathers, in all of the lands of the Diaspora, although particularly in that Diaspora. When we remember those dear to us, we must say what the lesson is, because even today we are but the surviving remnant, and those who seek to destroy us have not moved on from the world. Not here and not there.

This is the lesson.

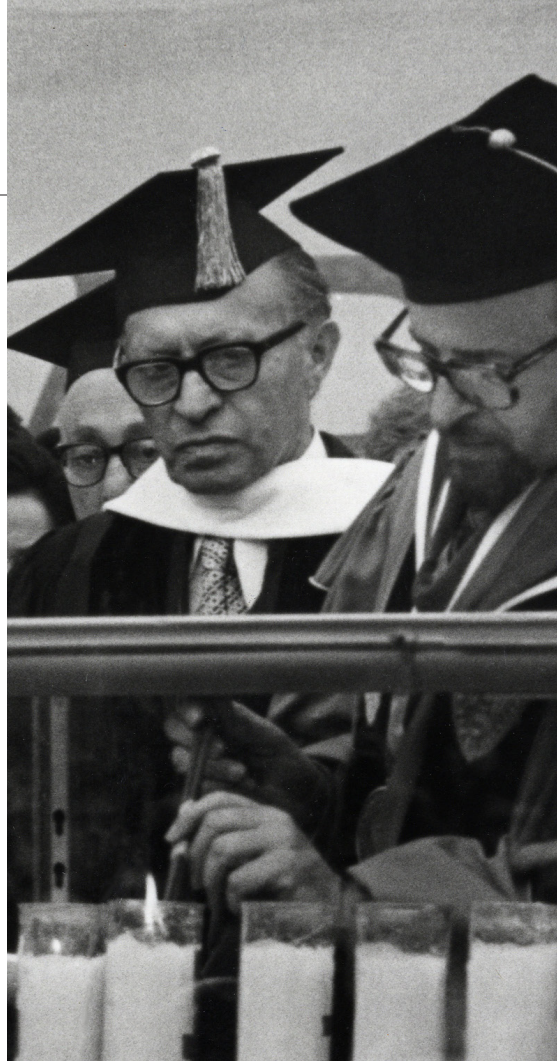
First: the Jew and his fear. This is not only a question of feeling. It's a matter of logical analysis and rationality. During the years of exile, the Jew got used to being afraid, since he was persecuted up to his neck. But here we learned what the fearful Jew leads to: humiliation, persecution, exile, beating, subjugation, and finally the gates of Auschwitz.

One the other hand: courage. When the Jew woke up and rediscovered his inner courage, what was given to him? A flag, a homeland, an army, sovereignty, human dignity.

In the midst of their innocence, our fathers, in their faith, loved the Land of Israel. We still remember how they prayed for rain in the Land of Israel. Not rain for the land on which they lived, and from whose soil they lived, but rain for the Land of Israel. They pleaded for the Land of Israel, cleaved to it. They would say, "the Land of Israel," in holiness and purity. And when they recited the grace after meals, coming to the words "and rebuild Jerusalem"—their eyes would flow with tears. How they would articulate the name "Jerusalem." They loved the Land of Israel.

We will remember their love and sanctify it just as we merited to free the Land of Israel and redeem Jerusalem. "And the priests and the people, standing in the courtyard of the Temple"—this was the prayer they recited. And the day came that we redeemed Jerusalem, and we have dug into its dirt, and we have walked the path and so we have seen the Gates of Huldah [that lead into the Temple]. They are still locked. And behold the mighty stones the Roman legions threw downward, covering the gates for 1,800 years. But they are there before our eyes.

Recalling your prayers in the synagogue, over 50 years ago: standing there [on the Temple Mount], by the southern wall,



you can see in your mind's eye the Gates of Huldah, and the masses of people flocking through them. "No one in Jerusalem [who had arrived for the pilgrimage festivals] ever said, 'I don't have enough room'" [Pirkei Avot 5:5]. That is: it was not said! It was tightly packed, but no one complained that it was too crowded in Jerusalem. The masses, thousands of them, came to Jerusalem—a city of 600,000 souls in the time of David. They ascended to the Gates of Huldah through the courtyard and the woman's courtyard—and you can see it, as if it were just yesterday.

S.Y. Agnon said [of his own East European hometown]: "Buchach. From there I came. But I was born in Jerusalem."

Brisk. From there we came. But we were born in Jerusalem.

"And the priests and the people, standing in the courtyard of the Temple," as if it were the day before yesterday. It's in our spirit.

Gratitude to our fathers, gratitude for their love of the Land of Israel, gratitude for their prayers, gratitude for their faith in the coming of the messiah. [As the traditional statement of faith has it:] "And even though he may tarry, I nevertheless await him." Our parents did not have the opportunity, but their children after them conquered the "beginning of redemption." And so, with love of Israel, with love for the Land of Israel and for Jerusalem, we will sanctify their scattered ashes, elevate their souls in holiness and purity, and carry in our hearts the memory of their love from generation to generation.

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# The Triumph of *White Nights*

BY SARAH WAPNER

**In times of turmoil and civil unrest, people have a** predictable tendency to return to George Orwell's classic novel, *1984*. Indeed, we are living through a tumultuous period, however, I propose that we turn to another work to inspire and enlighten us in this unpredictable time. In 1957, Menachem Begin published a remarkable memoir of his years in a Russian prison during the Second World War, entitled *Leilot Levanot* or *White Nights: The Story of a Prisoner in Russia*. Much like Begin himself, *White Nights* captures the depths of Jewish suffering and the heights of Jewish triumph when the world was black as night. *White Nights* is startling for its similarities to Orwell's authoritarianism, but upon closer reading it is clear that Begin's memoir serves a higher purpose: it is the call to action that Orwell never made.

When the Nazis invaded Poland in 1939, Begin and his wife Aliza fled to Soviet-occupied Vilna where they continued to engage in underground Revisionist-Zionist activity. Quickly deemed a threat by the Soviets, Begin was arrested in 1940 and spent the next two years a prisoner in the Soviet gulag system. From his recollections and reflections of that time emerged *White Nights*.

*White Nights* has many echoes of Orwell's *1984*. In Orwell's novel, "thoughtcrime" plays a central role in the life of Winston, the protagonist. Winston, whose first act of resistance is to buy a journal in which to write his private thoughts, lives in perpetual fear that he will be arrested and vaporized. In *White Nights*, freedom of thought is equally criminal. In one heated exchange with his Soviet interrogator, Begin maintains that he is entitled to state his opinion during the relentless interrogations. "There is no charge for what one thinks," Begin insists. But the interrogator is incredulous. "With us," the officer taunts, "you do pay for your thoughts and we know all about those thoughts..."

Propaganda is similarly inescapable. In *1984*, Winston describes the telescreen, an instrument that, in addition to spying on the citizens, would broadcast incessantly and could never be turned off. Begin's recollections were no different: "In one of Vilna's large squares a loud-speaker had been erected," Begin describes. "From morning to night, the loudspeakers incessantly blared forth speeches, announcements, decisions and proclamations."

Begin's memoir captures the essence of Begin, his visions for Jewish political independence and the spiritual and physical liberation of the Jews. Through his unwavering commitment to safeguarding human dignity and his willingness to resist the Soviet regime, Menachem Begin's voice transcends the circumstances of his imprisonment and speaks to the eternal yearnings of his people. Much like Winston Churchill, whose orations in times of mortal peril cemented his status as a great

statesman, Begin's story of a prisoner in Russia warns of great dangers to come if the threat of communism is not heeded. *White Nights* was his prophetic call to action.

In his commentary on the Prophet Isaiah's calls for King Chezkiah to repent, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z"l draws an important distinction between prophecy and prediction. Predictions, Rabbi Sacks explains, are successful when they come true. The prophets, on the other hand, do not make predictions. Rather, their prophecies warn of the calamities to come if a different path is not taken. "If a prophecy comes true, it has failed," Rabbi Sacks concludes.

*1984* is a prediction that came true—as evidenced by *White Nights*—but it does not allow the reader to pursue a course of redemption. When Winston is caught, he is tortured to the point of submission and his free will is vaporized. The resistance is no more. But Begin's book is prophetic: "Whoever reaches the gulf," Begin warns, "has the choice either of bridging it or of falling down into it. And when a people does not bridge the gulf, instead of development comes explosion; instead of progress, disaster." If we do not resist the forces of absolutism and tyranny, Begin warns, then we submit ourselves to a certain physical and spiritual annihilation. Begin suffered tremendously, but his survival (and the survival of his people) defies his prophecy.

Begin dedicates *White Nights* to the Unknown Martyr, endowing the nameless victims of tyranny with the dignity of remembrance. These nameless masses, vaporized and lost to the abyss, are afforded no such honor in Orwell's dystopia. Grief and remembrance do not exist in a society that routinely re-writes its past, present, and future. In Orwell's world, "there were fear, hatred, and pain, but no dignity of emotion or deep or complex sorrows."

Begin's book is a work of great emotion, of simultaneous joy and sorrow. Begin lives to avenge the nameless martyr, and Jewish survival—and the Jewish State—is the triumph that Orwell's book ultimately lacks. "We make the future by our choices," Begin reminds his readers. "The script has not yet been written. The future is radically open."

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