

Promoting Zionism at the Menachem Begin Heritage Center

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How the Menachem Begin Heritage Center Was Established

In 1992, Irgun leader, sixth Prime Minister of Israel and winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, Menachem Begin, passed away. Several days later, a group of his friends and associates gathered and decided to establish the Menachem Begin Heritage Foundation which would establish a center to commemorate Begin's work and heritage for future generations. These figures, including Yaakov Meridor, Reuven Hecht, Yechiel Kadishai, Harry Hurwitz, Natan Silber and others, began by raising millions of dollars in Israel and abroad to promote their goal. In 1998, Knesset member Reuven Rivlin proposed the Menachem Begin Commemoration Law, which was supported by nearly 100 Knesset members. The Knesset passed the law, thereby establishing the Begin Center as the official, state-funded memorial for Prime Minister Menachem Begin. After the law was passed, the Begin Center was established, containing archives, a library and a research center and running a regular program of commemoration, educational and publicity events. All of the events are connected to Menachem Begin's work and legacy. In June 2004, the Menachem Begin Heritage Foundation finished erecting its permanent building and museum, at the cost of \$20 million in donations. The building, overlooking the walls of the old city of Jerusalem was opened to the public. The center has since then had over 500,000 visitors.

The Center's activities

The Center, situated on the archeological site known as the Hinnom Ridge, is home to the Begin archives. The archives contain Menachem Begin's documents, as well as films, rare video and audio clips, a research library with books and research papers on different aspects of Begin's work and legacy such as neighborhood restoration, destroying the Iraqi nuclear reactor and the peace treaty with Egypt. The Center also hosts changing exhibits and runs educational programs within the school system, the Ministry of Defense, the Israeli army and the Israel Police force on topics such as civil service, the transition from underground activity to independence, dilemmas of authority and more. The Center runs a unique program for schools called the Junior Knesset program which reflects Menachem Begin's commitment to parliamentarian and democratic values by emphasizing the rule of law and endowing the art of debate upon youth throughout the country. This project gives the participants the opportunity to experience parliamentary work first hand, instilling values of democracy in the younger generation.

The Junior Knesset program is comprised of 12-30 hours of activities in school, concluded by a day in Jerusalem. The final day of the program is held in the Begin Center's auditorium in which the chairs and podium are set up to match the arrangement in the Knesset building. The students use the arrangement to simulate the legislation process, lobby activity, lobbyist appearances before committees and raising no-confidence votes. The students then tour the Begin Museum and visit the Knesset where they watch a debate in the plenum and meet Knesset members.

Two years ago, the Begin Center established a unique program called the Israel Government Fellows (IGF) program. The program was approved and is endorsed by the government and is part of the Israeli government and Jewish Agency MASA (Israel Journey) project. The program's main goal is to strengthen the connection

between young Jewish people with leadership potential from different communities and the state of Israel and Zionist ideology. The program brings Jewish college graduates from all over the world to Israel and introduces them to the Israeli government system and its central governing bodies. This is accomplished by completing internships in government offices alongside an educational program on relevant topics. The program is divided into two parts: the first, lasting three weeks, is an opening seminar and the second is a five month internship in government offices. During the internship, participants work in different government offices for four days a week, while the fifth day of the week is dedicated to studies and tours. Throughout the entire period, participants spend two evenings per week learning the Hebrew language in an Ulpan.

Alongside these activities is the highlight of the Center – the museum.

The Menachem Begin Museum

The Begin Museum exhibition is an experiential journey through the milestones in Menachem Begin's life. The museum takes the visitor on a journey through time, and through Begin's life story, unfolds some of the most dramatic and moving moments in the history of the state of Israel.

The exhibit is divided into four sections: The first part of the museum deals with Begin's childhood in Europe. This section was designed during a visit to Brisk, Lithuania, the city in which Begin was born. He moved to Warsaw to study law and from there he and his wife moved to Vilna to escape the German occupation in Poland during the Second World War. This part of the museum describes Begin's arrest and detention in Siberia for the crime of Zionist activity and presents a replication of Begin's interrogation by the Soviets.

The second part of the museum is devoted to the period in which Begin commanded the Irgun underground organization. This section describes some of the Irgun's significant activities in their battle against the British such as bombing the King David Hotel and breaking into the Acre prison, as well as other topics such as the Saison period in which Haganah members hunted down Irgun members and the story of the Altalena ship. The next section of the museum presents Menachem Begin's years in the Israeli government opposition. Visitors are first invited to take a seat in the Begin family's living room, set up identically to the room in their home at 1 Rosenbaum St in Tel Aviv. Visitors then watch the battle against the reparations agreement with Germany; look on as Begin joins the National Unity Government before the six-day war broke out and join the crowds in the square where Begin gave some of his famous speeches. The fourth section of the museum describes Begin's work as Prime Minister. The peace treaty with Egypt, winning the Nobel Peace Prize, reconstructing neighborhoods, bombing the Iraqi nuclear reactor and the first Lebanon War are displayed in a dramatic exhibition spread over three screens. The museum visit ends with a walk down the Avenue of the Heritage which portrays Menachem Begin's heritage as it appeared in his writing and public activity over the years. Visitors exit the museum via a special elevator that takes them directly out into the open Jerusalem air.

Museum tours are given in English and Hebrew. Earphones are available to hear the tours translated into Spanish, French, Russian and Arabic. For many CUT some visitors, the museum is a return to the past. Some shed tears as they leave the museum, as they recall their own personal encounters with Menachem Begin; whether as Irgun members, from the audiences listening to his speeches in the city squares or as excited viewers watching Egyptian president Anwar Sadat's historical visit to Israel on their television sets. For those visitors that did not know Menachem Begin, the museum's

usage of modern multimedia technology and amazing effects provide the rare opportunity to experience an almost personal encounter with a figure that they have never met.

Activities and Events

In addition to the museum, the Begin Heritage Center runs a wide variety of events related to Begin's heritage and work. These events include seminars, cultural evenings, book launches, courses, lectures, tours and more. Admission to the vast majority of events at the Begin Center is free and occasionally a minimal admission fee is charged, in order to make the events available to all parts of society and expose the widest possible audience to Begin's work and legacy. The events cover more than just Begin's work directly. There are events that cover a wide range of Jewish and democratic issues, as well as current events, culture and Jewish history. Last year, for instance, the Begin Center was home to one-time, unique events on topics such as Yair Stern – commander of the Lehi organization, Rabbi Aryeh Levin, known as the Rabbi of Prisoners, Ze'ev Jabotinsky's poetry and writing, Ethiopian Jews immigration to Israel, underground battles before the establishment of the state of Israel, Shavuot night study programs and more.

In addition to the one-time events held at the Center, there are series on different topics. One of our most successful programs was a seven-session series entitled Chapters in the History of Hebrew Song. Each performance in the series discussed poets and composers that left their mark on Israeli musical culture. Each event included joint singing, moving stories of poets and poetry and rare videos and recordings. The sessions explored the works of Haim Nahman Bialik, Alexander Penn, Avraham Shlonsky, Nathan Alterman, Saul Tchernichovsky, Leah Goldberg, Rachel the poet and others. The program was led by Nachum Heiman, composer

and winner of the Israel Prize, accompanied by Tslil Biran on the piano. An additional program was added to the series due to popular demand. Another program was a series on Hebrew National Films at the Begin Center. Each session began with a film related to Jewish, Zionist and historical topics, followed by a lecture and debate with the film's creators or experts on the topic discussed in the film. The films shown in this series are:

- **Alone on the Walls** - a documentary about the battle for the old city of Jerusalem in 1948
- **Dubak** – The Palestinian Jew – the story of an educator and unusual figure amongst the typical Israeli settlers
- **Qassam** – about the population of the southern city of Sderot and how they cope with the daily threat of qassam rockets.
- **Rise from the Dust** – dealing with the disengagement from Gaza
- **Triumph of Spirit** – on the life of the late Colonel Dror Weinberg, killed in Hebron in 2002.
- **One of the Lamed Vav** – about Jerusalem's saintly Reb Aryeh Levin, rabbi of the prisoners.

The Begin Center offers a unique program of enrichment courses to the general public on various topics given by first-rate lecturers. The list of courses includes:

- Film and Politics – the prisoner's dilemma in American film, Prof. Abraham Diskin, the Hebrew University
 - Encounters with the language of the Kabbalah, Dr. Sheli Goldberg, Bar Ilan University
 - Jewish Melodies through the Ages, Dr. Moti Friedman
 - Creative writing workshop based on Jewish Sources, Ms. Yonah Deri
 - Israeli Memory, Dr. Udi Lebel
- Begin Center events are usually held in one of the Center's modern

lecture halls or in the auditorium that seats 300 people. The Center's facilities also include three classrooms, a seminar room, meeting room, lecture room and synagogue.

Information on activities and events at the Begin Center can be found on our website www.begincenter.org.il or by calling our offices at 02-5652020.