

Begin and Diaspora Dissent

by Howard Adelman

A number of North American Jews endorsed a statement drafted by the Peace Now Movement which criticized the current policies of the Israeli government while expressing support for Israel. In a press conference at Beit Agron on July 1, 1980, one of the signatories, Leonard Fein, held a press conference to issue a statement with respect to the endorsement by fifty-six active Jewish leaders from North America. The conference resulted in some misinterpretations, first that Fein was spokesman of the group, and secondly, that the participants in the conference were personally attacking individuals in the Israeli government and were engaged in aggressive abuse. Begin replied to the letter in a formal statement published in the Jerusalem Post International edition in the July 27-August 2, 1980 issue. This article is a commentary on Begin's reply.

Begin first makes a distinction between words of criticism and aggressive abuse, ignoring the fact



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that Leonard Fein denied that anyone at the conference engaged in any personal attacks of any kind. Therefore, when Begin refers to the verbal aggression of the critics, he apparently does not mean any personal insult unless he did not read Fein's letter at all. At the same time one cannot be sure, since as an example of aggressive abuse, Begin refers to the hearsay evidence of letter-writers to newspapers that the Peace Now demonstrators in front of the Prime Minister's office "jump for joy on learning that I (Begin) had suffered a heart attack and was hospitalized". Now it is clear from Fein's letter that he does not associate with any such response if it indeed took place. Quite the reverse. Fein wrote, "while there may be sharp differences of view between us, our prayers are always with you". It seems that Begin is guilty of aggressive abuse in associating Fein with any irresponsible party that would jump for joy at the fact that Begin had suffered a heart attack and was hospitalized.

The central issue, however, is not the tone of the reply, that is, aggressive abuse, but is the right of Diaspora Jewry to criticize the government of Israel. Begin clearly states that he has "no objection to Jews who live in the Diaspora criticizing the policy of the day". What he does question is Fein *organizing* American Jews to publish such a statement (a claim which Fein went to reasonable length to deny), and that the statement would be published at a time when it would bring comfort to the enemies of Israel. In other words, it is not the criticism of the Israeli government that is found to be at fault in Begin's eyes, but the organizing of the

criticism and the consequent comfort to the enemies of Israel. Yet nowhere in his letter does Begin explain why this particular time is inappropriate for public criticism. The arguments he, in fact, uses indicates that, at no time in the history of Israel, would public criticism have been warranted. So, although Begin says that he does not object to criticism in principle, it is quite clear that he objects to it in fact as long as Israel is in any way endangered.

Begin's logic runs as follows: Any criticism of Begin would comfort Israel's enemies; no Jew should in any way act to give comfort to Israel's enemies; therefore, criticism of the Israeli government is unacceptable. Using an identical premise, the same logic undermines Begin's own position: Strategies which alienate allies comfort Israel's enemies; no Jew should in any way act to give comfort to Israel's enemies; therefore, no Jew (and, hence, Begin) should initiate a strategy which alienates allies.

The issue is not logic, however, but the source of the present danger. Begin presents four arguments to claim that public criticism is not justifiable based on the current situation, history, the future beneficial consequences of current Israeli policy, and language.

With respect to the current situation Begin correctly cites the mounting evidence from the Copenhagen conference on women, the Fatah Damascus resolution and the motions and speeches in the U.N. to suggest an escalating operation which is intended to delegitimize the existence of Israel altogether and justify its elimination.



Prime Minister Begin

What Begin ignores is not the description of the current situation, but the interpretation of a strategy to handle it. In one option, if the enemy wishes to eliminate Israel's legitimate existence, Israel can never permit the vanguard of the enemy—Arab Palestinians—to have an existence which could be considered legitimate, suffering the inevitable consequences that, since Israel retains military control over the West Bank and Gaza, Israel will be seen to be recalcitrant and stubborn. An alternative strategy to the same situation, is to continually offer to give the enemy a legitimate ground for its existence on condition that one's own security is not endangered, and that one's own legitimacy is accepted. Such a policy provides grounds for retaining an ethical stand and the support of a number of allies. It further exposes the enemy's intent for what it really is instead of allowing the enemy to cover up its real intent. Although the fact that criticism exists in and outside Israel may comfort Israel's enemies, the content of that criticism and the alternative strategy implied discomfort, then what comforts them most and what alienates Israel's allies is *Begin's strategy*.

The second argument is based on history. Begin writes "never did we seek to do them wrong. The absolute historic truth is that they inflicted on themselves *all* the wrongs done to them" (my italics). Perhaps some of the wrongs or even most of the wrongs. . . but *all* of the wrongs? One

of the clear revelations that comes out of Begin's statements is his propensity to draw everything in terms of white and black. The Jews always offer all good and the Arabs are the source of all that is wrong. Presumably, in Begin's history, the Israelis have never done a single wrong in administering the West Bank territories. There were no conflicting legitimate interests over the succession rights to the land of the mandated territory of Palestine, but only one legitimate right, that of the Jews, and one illegitimate claim, that of the Arabs, in spite of the fact that during the war, Arab landowners lost much land to Jews, aside from the state owned lands. This is distinct from the West Bank and Gaza. Can one really say that *no* wrong was done to the Arabs even if the Arabs were the main perpetrators of the harm done to themselves? Begin goes on to say that "as long as we fought the British for the liberation of Arab's Israel from colonial rule there was total peace between Jew and Arab in the country". I can't understand what Begin means; he knows as well as anybody else about the riots in 1936, 1929, 1926, etc. Begin's black and white categories distort the historical suffering of both Arabs and Jews.

Begin seems to turn history upside-down. He interprets an apparent existing situation to indicate only one possible strategy without considering any alternatives. He is equally obtuse to any different interpretations when considering the future consequences of policies. Thus, when he insists over and over again on autonomy, while insisting that "security alone shall we reserve", he engages in the serious illogical step of basing his statements on equivocation. When security comes to mean all effective policy making, autonomy is reduced to a shrivelled sliver of independence. If Palestinians on the West Bank and the Gaza Strip have only the right of a very restricted administration and no effective legislative rights, then security gobbles up all effective issues, since any legislative issue can be interpreted as a security matter.

The irony of all this abuse of historical understanding, disallowance of alternative strategies, and misrepresentation of the consequences of current policies is Begin's emphasis over and over again

that specific language has very dangerous connotations. Thus, if Begin is interpreted as desiring a greater Israel, this is abusive language since Western Israel (the West Bank) is smaller than Belgium. In this case the word 'greater' seems to have ethical connotations and not just physical connotations. But Begin himself can refer to handing the authority over the West Bank to the indigenous population as handing it over "to foreign rule and foreign sovereignty", a statement much more misleading than any reference to 'greater' Israel.

Begin is the one who clearly engages in verbal abuse, implying that critics of his government want to hand over the West Bank to a Palestinian state run by the PLO who would use it as a jumping-off ground for the destruction of Israel; if you are not for my position, therefore you are for the PLO and for the enemies of Israel. There are no allowances for a wide range of alternatives, by people who interpret the intentions of the PLO as clearly as does Begin, but adopt different strategies to deal with the PLO. Begin deliberately abuses language and the universal faculty by which we all can conduct discourse, reason, to condemn his critics. It is not surprising then that Begin is accused of being an unreasonable leader. When he ends up requesting that critics "refrain from proffering advice, at least in public, within earshot of our enemies who conspire to do us evil", he invites critics to point out that, in spite of his immense experience, he is an abuser of language, of history, of strategic considerations and of his critics. Leaders who cannot even understand supporters who voice disagreements, cannot expect empathy for their own position.

There is a basic issue which Begin fails to bring out by the extremism of his position—the need for caution in the use of public criticism of Israel. Since few opportunities for public criticism are permitted from within the ranks of Israel's enemies, one consequence is that Jews appear to criticize Jews with no equivalent publicly voiced criticism from within the Palestinian camp. However, there is an even greater danger. The fear of this unbalance may be used to stifle criticism and encourage Jews to imitate alien practices.