

We Were All Born in Jerusalem

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“We Were All Born in Jerusalem”: A Never-Before-Translated Speech by Menachem Begin <https://mosaicmagazine.com/observation/israel-zionism/2020/05/we-were-all-born-in-jerusalem-a-never-before-translated-speech-by-menachem-begin/>

What the future prime minister of Israel had to say about his past and present homelands.

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Menachem Begin in 1978. Dick Loek/Toronto Star via Getty Images.

Before World War II, Brisk (a/k/a Brest or Brest-Litovsk), a city of 300,000 in what is now Belarus, had been for centuries one of the most vibrant centers of Jewish life in the world, known especially for its rabbis and scholars, and, by the early 20th century, also for being an important hub of Zionist politics and activism. All this activity ended swiftly with the war, when the city was one of the first to fall to the Third Reich during its 1941 invasion of the Soviet Union. The Nazis not only put an end to Jewish activity in Brisk, they sought to erase the Jews themselves. Over the course of a few days in October 1942, most of the remaining Jews of Brisk—nearly 20,000 in number—were murdered by the Nazis and their accomplices.

Thirty years later, in 1972, an association of former residents of Brisk by then living in Israel held a commemorative event for the martyred Jews of their home. The keynote address was given by the then-leader of Israel’s political opposition, Menachem Begin, who would five years later become the country’s

prime minister.

Born in Brisk in 1913, Begin had lost both of his parents and a brother in the Holocaust. His speech pays tribute to and commemorates not only family and friends, but the community as a whole. Through extensive personal recollection and poetic imagery, Begin evokes a lost world not only of Brisk but of prewar East European Jewry more generally.

No English translation can do justice to the speech, which is rich with references that would have been easily understood by his audience but are more obscure to the contemporary Israeli or American reader. First and foremost Begin invokes the Jewish religious tradition. Not only are there overt citations of Jeremiah and the Yom Kippur liturgy, but also more subtle allusions, like the phrase “strike them with a mighty blow,” borrowed loosely from Judges 15:8. Present too is modern Jewish literature, including the work of the poet and novelist Zalman Shneour (1886–1959), who wrote in both Hebrew and Yiddish, and Ahad Ha’am (1856–1927), the theorist of cultural Zionism.

Begin also conveys the texture of his hometown’s history, relating a famous legend that the Padua-born rabbi and communal leader Saul Wahl Katzenellenbogen (1514–1617) was made king of Poland for a day. Then he weaves together the city’s disparate and often competing strands of Zionist activism, mentioning fondly the secular Zionist Tarbut school, its religious-Zionist counterpart Tahk’moni, and the socialist-Zionist youth group Ha-Shomer Ha-Tsa’ir (the Young Watchman). The last of these Begin had belonged to early in his life, before embracing its right-wing competitor Beitar; at the time of his speech former members of Ha-Shomer Ha-Tsa’ir dominated the political and military elite, and included Begin’s bitterest political enemies.

In this way the speech is deeply political and points toward many of the central themes that typified Begin’s life and politics. These themes include: a) reverence for the Jewish past and for the rituals, beliefs, and world of Judaism, b) the unity of the Jewish people above and beyond partisan divisions, and c) the Zionist idea that only by rediscovering a form of inner courage could Jews begin to defend themselves and their way of life. These themes come together through the invocation—adapted from the great Hebrew writer S.Y. Agnon’s speech at the 1966 Nobel banquet—of the city and metaphor of Jerusalem. It is therefore fitting that we present this translation on the occasion of *Yom Yerushalayim*—the anniversary of the liberation of Israel’s capital from Jordanian occupation.

A copy of the Hebrew version of the speech—virtually unknown until its significance was uncovered by my colleague Meir Soloveichik—is preserved in the Menachem Begin Center archives. Yet it deserves the attention of English-language readers as well. I am thus pleased to present the first English-language translation of this remarkable oration.

—Neil Rogachevsky

Written by Menachem Begin and delivered by him on December 1, 1972 at a ceremony for the martyred Jews of Brisk.

Translated by Neil Rogachevsky & Michael Weiner

Shrouded by the awe of the day, by the purity of the holy ones and the holiness of the pure ones and the love of its lovers, the city of our birth appears before my eyes. The city of our youth, in which we were born and bred, learned and suffered, and dreamed the dreams of our youth: about its streets and its alleys, about its sands in summer and its swamps in winter, about its gardens and its two rivers; about its Jews and its Gentiles, about the love that dwelt there, and the trauma inflicted on its Jews, about all the good that was there and all that was the opposite—the city of our birth.

Many Jews lived there, and Gentiles too. And the Jews had the custom of calling such a city “a city and mother of Israel.” The city was Brisk—not one of the largest cities in the world, but perhaps it was a mother, or a stepmother, to its Jews. We were all proud that this Brisk had a history: the legendary king chosen to rule for a day or two, and the towering geniuses of Torah, cedars of Lebanon. Who among us did not see ourselves as companions to Rabbi Yoshe Ber Soloveitchik [1820–1892], to [his son] Rabbi Chaimke [1853–1918], as if we had been with them all the days of our lives? Who among us did not take pride in the fact that great and righteous scholars sprouted from this city? Who among us did not recount how Trotsky, [at the Brest-Litovsk treaty that ended Russia’s participation in World War I], had spoken the words that have echoed through the world until this very day: “no peace, no war.” And who among us does not remember the invasions and the changing of regimes and the fires and the rebuilding, the suffering of the compulsory evacuations [during World War I], and the return to the city.

Verily, an important city. In every encyclopedia you will find her, primarily in reference to the famous agreement between the Bolsheviks and the Germans in 1918. And this city also played a role in the growth of Zionism: early Zionists, followers of Herzl, participants in the first Zionist congresses, and the famous weeping of the first Zionist congresses.

In this city there were Zionist pioneers who left [for Palestine] before World War I and others who followed in their footsteps. The city also played a role in the pioneering wave of the early 1920s, when we were all still immigrants-to-be, passing under flags of azure and white, in the same wonderful youth movement, whose name in those days was Ha-Shomer Ha-Tsa’ir, under the command of Meir Friedman, of blessed memory.

Jewish eyes flow with tears seeing the renewal of the Jewish youth, his pride, standing tall, singing [the popular pioneer song]—still with Ashkenazi pronunciation—“service is our lives, from all troubles it will save us.” The wonderful schools Tarbut, Ḥayyim, and Taḥk’moni. And the splendid yeshivahs, in which the melodious sound of the teaching and study of Torah is heard well past midnight, the music flowing through the students, who wear out the study bench, who never leave it, despite desperate poverty, despite living on bread and water—and yet they keep on studying.

Such was the city of our youth. She is no longer. We will never again return to her. Her houses stand, her gardens are green, her trees still turn in fall. Even the school where we studied still stands on the hill. But it is our city no more. Our world is destroyed; it will not rise again. We will never again go to the streets of Brisk, where there are no Jews. There is nothing for us there—only the memory of the ashes that have scattered we know not where.

But there are still days or nights, I believe, when every one of us is still in the city of our youth. I will tell some of my own experiences. It was nearly 50 years ago that we invited a cantor to the great synagogue, and for him we created a community choir, with him at its center; it was called *ha-m'shor'rim*, [The Singers].

In those days we had a ritual slaughterer named Prager. During my youth I would go to the middle of the city to bring him birds to slaughter for *kapparat* [the ritual killing of chickens, which are then fed to the poor, on the eve of Yom Kippur]. He had a son, a friend from class; Berele was his name. And he was one of *ha-m'shor'rim*.

He had a voice that would be called *alt* [old] in Yiddish. Indeed, we heard the voice of a nightingale. On the night of *Kol Nidrei*, nearly 50 years ago, he sang with his fellow singers. I still remember today the sound, what we called in the old tongue the *Ya'alot* of *Kol Nidrei*, [a liturgical poem recited near the end of the Yom Kippur evening service].

The Hebrew of this prayer is ungrammatical, and we have no explanation as to why the gender of the nouns and verbs do not agree, but for many generations we and our forefathers have sung it thus. And Berele sang the words "Let our petition ascend from the evening, and let our outcry arrive in the morning, and let our joy arrive by evening." To this day I can hear his voice.

And in the special holiday prayer on Rosh Hashanah, Berele would sing solo: "Is Ephraim not my dear son? A pleasant child? For since I spake against him, I do earnestly remember him still: therefore my bowels are troubled for him; I will surely have mercy upon him, saith the Lord" [Jeremiah 31:20]. Until today I hear his voice in this prayer, or the prayer in his voice.

And on the afternoon of Yom Kippur, when all were fasting and in prayer shawls, not many remained within the walls of the synagogue. But those who stayed studied intensely the *avodah* [the liturgical poem that describes the Yom Kippur service of the Jerusalem Temple in intricate detail]. And my father would insist that especially during the recitation of the *avodah* one should stay and pray, since perhaps the holiness of this prayer equaled the holiness of all the holy prayers of the rest of the year. And the voice of the cantor blended with those of the singers: "and the priests and the people standing in the courtyard, when they heard the ineffable name leave the lips of the high priest in holiness and purity, would prostrate themselves and fall on their faces and say: 'blessed is the name of His glorious kingdom forever and forever!'"

Fifty years have passed. And what events have taken place since then! Where have we not been? In towns and metropolises, in prisons and concentration camps, in underground organizations—both in the homeland and the far reaches of the Diaspora—we have been there. But on that night, on that day, you stand in the great synagogue of Brisk, every man in every location, and you see before your eyes the illuminated synagogue, and the small house of study, the wide doors and the stairs leading down [to the holy ark], to accord with the verse "out of the depths I call to you, Lord" (Psalm 130), as was customary for many synagogues in the Diaspora. And my father would stand beneath the ark, and next to him an assimilated Jew who worked in the city, speaking only the non-Jewish language [i.e., Polish]. And though the latter never

once came to the synagogue during the rest of the year, on Yom Kippur he would stand on his feet all day, and would not leave the synagogue during the breaks between prayers, to prove that not only did he pray, but that he fasted all day, despite being assimilated.

And the aged beadle, who would ascend the stage, ceaselessly tapping his large open prayer book, but hushing the crowd, so that the [final line of the liturgy, that marks the holiday's end]—"may His name be blessed forever and ever"—not be said before the appointed time. And the eastern wall and the special door—locked on the rest of the year—behind the holy ark, designated for the rabbi, so that if he wanted to come to pray without having to cross through the courtyard and the entire synagogue, he could instead come in through this special entrance.

And the working men, standing from left to right, near the entrance and amidst the whole congregation—the innocent, the pure, the holy. He who struggles to make a living and lives in difficulty, who built a small house where there was love for the mother and honor for the father and great desire for enlightenment, for learning, for progress. Hatred of Israel surrounded us. But the light was so bright in this synagogue. There from a great height and distance, from the women's balcony, separated by an aperture, mother watched—all of our mothers—and, their eyes full of tears, they prayed; they prayed with all their hearts for the sake of their husbands and for the children and for everyone to be healthy so that there would be no sickness nor grief nor distress at home.

On that day, the day of Yom Kippur, and that night, the night of *Kol Nidrei*, wherever you may be, you find yourself in the synagogue of Brisk. And you still hear, as Berele sang, *ya'ale v'yavo*, just as the nightingale sang to us, and that majestic prayer: "and the priests and the people, standing in the courtyard of the Temple."

All of this has been destroyed, disappeared, erased, consumed, burned. Thirty years ago. Thirty years ago [we lost] our loved ones, along with the millions of other Jews. Many generations previously a poet had, without knowing it, described them [in the aforementioned *avodah* prayer]:

Like those who are lost with none to find them, like the hungry with none to feed them, like slaves with none to buy them, like the thirsty with none to give them drink, like prisoners who cannot be freed, like the hated with none to love them, like the bent with none to straighten them, like orphans without fathers, like the impure without means of purification, like the forgotten with none to remember them, like the mourners with none to comfort them, like the despised with none to honor them, like the captured with no escape.

When I was a child, a Jew hater, a Pole, shot 36 Jews in [nearby] Pinsk. They were Zionists. But the Jew hater thought they were Bolsheviks and shot them against a wall. For many years after you could see the blood on the wall of the synagogue where they were shot.

And I was taught a song of that sacrifice, that bitter sacrifice, that sacrifice of tears for the holy martyrs of Pinsk. Back then, in 1920, 30 Jews were killed. That shook our entire world. Twenty years later: 360,000 Jews killed, 3,600,000 Jews killed, six million Jews killed. We were no longer shocked. They were put to

death, and none among the powerful nations, those which had the means to destroy the death camps and wreck the train tracks, to slow if not prevent the extermination—did a thing to try to save them.

And so it was as if the ground swallowed up an entire nation—and our loved ones amongst them. But until then, until then—there was something in Brisk, just as in Pinsk. In all these cities and towns, there was a love of Israel across the generations; there was faith in the God of Israel, in desperate poverty but in spiritual wealth, and faith in the study of Torah; there was religious brilliance and Enlightenment, Zionism, [the Revisionist youth group] Beitar as well as Ha-Shomer Ha-Tsa'ir and all the other movements—until then there was something special.

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 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] Shneur 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.

Every Sunday, a sermon, saturated with hate for Jews, would be preached in the church. Sometime in the Middle Ages, it was ordained by the church that one had to pray for the good of the perfidious Jew—*perfidis Judaeis*. The truth is that in ancient Latin, “perfidious” merely means a non-believer, what the Muslims call a *ghyr*. But every linguistic expression from olden days, or many of them, has adopted a particular meaning, usage, and connotation with the passing of time. So for example the word “cynic,” which, at the time of its creation, signified a philosophic school, later took on a new meaning. So too “perfidious”: not just an infidel—an unbeliever—but a hypocrite and a cheat. And this is how all the nations understood this prayer, and this word, and it's as if they prayed for the “dastardly” Jew.

Then came John XXIII—not just a pope, but a great man—who ordered that this prayer be removed, apparently for the first time. But for generations, hundreds of millions of people heard the sermon and had been called to pray, every Sunday, for the perfidious Jew. What hatred that prayer had instilled in the hearts of these worshippers! And it's as if we didn't hear them. They were armed. They all carried weapons—both blunt objects and firearms. All of them hated the Jew, all of them awaited our downfall, all prepared their sacks, just in case, for looting.

And who were the police? Who were our defenders? They too heard the prayer on Sundays. So in the East, and from the West, came “anti-Semitism”—that artificial word. They didn't want to say “anti-Jewish,” so they said “anti-Semitic,” as if we were the only Semites in the world, thus camouflaging their special hatred for Jews, hatred that had become scientific and philosophic, expressed by writers and priests—priests that took confession from the Kaiser [an apparent reference to the German court preacher Adolf Stoecker]—and from great historians [probably Heinrich von Treitschke]. All of them taught hatred of the Jews. Martin Luther, the man of progress, creator of the Reformation, called to burn synagogues, to make Jews live in stables, to take their money, and to make them weep over their bitter fate.

Hundreds of years later, a Protestant writer said: “Luther essentially taught the Germans to mark the Jews out as the prince of demons.” And the Jews did not pay attention. It was not just oppression. This innocence characterized Jewish existence. [We believed] that somehow, someone would protect us. And what do we say, not indeed on Yom Kippur but on the night of the Passover seder: “in every generation, they rise against us to destroy us, but God saved us from their hands.” But he saved only the “surviving remnant” of the Jewish people. Our existence continued, yes, and there was great longing for the Land of Israel. But the innocence of exilic existence did not cease.

On this night, 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.