



JEWISH COMMENTARY

The Moment That Made Israel a Nation

MEIR Y. SOLOVEICHIK

“JEWS DO NOT SHOOT AT JEWS.” So the young Menachem Begin confidently assured a worried young man on June 20, 1948, just after Israel became the world’s newest nation. A ship under the control of Begin’s militia, the Irgun, had come ashore at Kfar Vitkin with badly needed arms and ammunition for the fledgling Jewish state. A disagreement ensued between Begin and Israel’s leader, David Ben-Gurion, as to the allocation of the arms on the *Altalena*. Ben-Gurion ordered Israeli Defense Forces to surround the ship. A boy assisting in the unloading of its cargo fretted that those who had just come ashore might be fired upon. Begin assured him that this was inconceivable. Whatever might happen, Jews do not shoot at Jews.

He proved badly mistaken. A firefought did break out, and the *Altalena* fled back to the Mediterranean, landing near what is now Tel Aviv’s Frischman Beach on June 22, with Begin on board. David Ben-Gurion ordered the ship shelled. Sixteen members of the Irgun were killed. Standing on the ship while being fired upon—with dear friends of his dying—Begin ordered those aboard the *Altalena* not to fire back, declaring *milkhemet ahim le-olam lo*, never a war between brothers. After leaving the smoldering *Altalena*, with much of its arms cache lost forever, Begin went on the radio and again ordered his seething followers not to seek revenge. After wrongly predicting that Jews

would never shoot at Jews, Begin now enunciated an even more extraordinary principle: Jews *do not* shoot at Jews, even when those Jews are shooting at them.

This was his greatest moment. The survival of the newly born state was anything other than assured, and shooting back, however justified the self-defense might have been, would have torn the people apart. In his memoir *The Prime Ministers: An Intimate Narrative of Israeli Leadership*, Yehuda Avner quotes Begin explaining his motivation: “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: *behiya le-dorot* [a weeping for generations].” This time, civil war did not take place, and the nascent Jewish state flourished into the mighty, vibrant, “start-up nation” we know it to be today.

This coming month, millions of Israelis and Jews around the world will celebrate the 70th anniversary of Israel’s birth. Far fewer will mark, a month later, the 70th anniversary of the *Altalena* affair, and Begin’s decision on that day. Yet it is perhaps the second-most important moment in 1948, one that defined Israeli democracy forever.

Herein lies a lesson. Statesman, leaders, great men of history, are usually remembered for what they achieved. Yet often their greatest moments are best understood by what they *chose not to do*. We speak of George Washington as the father of our country, and in that context we recall what he accomplished: expelling the British from Boston, crossing the Delaware in

MEIR Y. SOLOVEICHIK is the rabbi of Congregation Shearith Israel in New York City and the director of the Straus Center for Torah and Western Thought at Yeshiva University.



The shelling of the Altalena.

the dead of night, conquering Cornwallis at Yorktown, leading the Constitutional Convention, becoming the first president of the United States. Yet it may well be that these achievements pale in comparison to Washington's decision *not* to seize power and to resign his commission once victory over the British had been secured. In today's democratic age, we take this moment for granted, but Washington's resignation was best understood by his enemy George III. "If he does that," said the monarch, "he will be the greatest man in the world."

Similarly, Menachem Begin is remembered for what he did: the Osirak strike, peace with Egypt, leading a rebellion against the British. Yet it was what Begin did on the *Altalena*—or rather, what he asked his fellow Jews *not* to do—that will ensure his immortality.

While Washington's resigning of his commission may not be the moment Americans associate first and foremost with his life, our country nevertheless accords it the honor it deserves: John Trumbull's magnificent depiction of the moment hangs in the Capitol today. But precious little has been done to remember the events surrounding the *Altalena*. A small stone stands near Frischman Beach, bearing the names of the 16 dead and emblazoned with Begin's *milhemet ahim le-olam lo*. Nearby, bizarrely, is a cartoonish statue of Ben-Gurion standing on his head, one of the most popular photo sites in Tel Aviv. As the *Jerusalem Post* notes, "it's likely that few of the people taking selfies with 'the old man' realize that right behind it is the site of one of the seminal events of Israel's early history." Recently, a memorial has been established at the grave of the *Altalena's* dead, but it is visited only by those who know the story already.

Perhaps the truest memorial to the *Altalena*—albeit only an implicit one—can be found at the grave of Menachem Begin himself. Begin requested that he be buried on the Mount of Olives next to the graves of Moshe Barzani and Meir Feinstein, two Jewish fighters who had blown up a grenade in a cell in 1947—embracing each other and dying together right before their scheduled execution by the British. These two young men's families came from opposite ends of the earth: One was an Iraqi Kurdish Jew, the other an Ashkenazi of Eastern European descent. For Begin, their deaths in each other's arms embodied the notion that Jews are bound by blood, that too often that blood has been shed by our enemies, and that we must never shed it ourselves.

After June 22, the burnt and wrecked hull of the *Altalena* sat offshore for a year until Ben-Gurion ordered it sunk in 1949. In 2011, the suggestion was made that it be raised and restored, a monument to one of the most important moments in the birth of the Jewish state. The moment to raise it has surely come. Let the *Altalena* stand, publicly, off the shores of Tel Aviv. Let the people of the vibrant democracy that its founders created discuss and debate the events surrounding that moment. Let children board the *Altalena* and stand where the boat's passengers—survivors of Hitler's Holocaust—had once stood, looking longingly toward the approaching shore, bringing weapons to their brethren. Let students stare at the shore and imagine being fired upon by those they had come to join as brothers in arms. And let them imagine one man standing firmly on the deck, amid the hurtling shells and dying comrades and followers yearning to return fire, and telling them resolutely, in words that would define a nation, that Jews do not shoot at Jews. 📍