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How Jimmy Carter and Menachem Begin Clashed Over the Bible

The president wanted Jews out of the West Bank. The prime minister went only as far as the Sinai.

By Meir Soloveichik

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Anwar al-Sadat shakes hands with Menachem Begin as Jimmy Carter looks on at Camp David, Md., Sept. 6, 1978. PHOTO: AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGE

Prior to the September 1978 Camp David summit with Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin and Egyptian President Anwar Sadat, Jimmy Carter went on vacation in Jackson Hole, Wyo. There he read profiles prepared by the Central Intelligence Agency about the leaders he was to meet. As Lawrence Wright puts it in “Thirteen Days in September” (2014), the CIA described Sadat as “a visionary,” a “bold” leader who was “willing to be flexible.” In contrast, the agency depicted Begin as “secretive” and “legalistic.” The profiles seemed to color Carter’s perspective. On returning from his first discussion with Begin at Camp David, he reflected to his wife, Rosalynn, “I don’t think he has any intention of going through with a peace treaty.”

He was wrong. Begin and Sadat made a peace that has endured for decades, a testament to both men’s leadership. Yet the accords that emerged from Camp David were very different from what Carter envisioned. As we ponder Carter’s foreign-policy legacy, it is striking to consider how both Begin and Carter took their cues from Scripture—but in very different ways.

From the moment of his election, Carter was eager to change the Middle East, and he was certain that his deep faith made him more qualified than his presidential predecessors to do so. “I had taught the Bible ever since I was 18 years old,” Carter told his aide Stuart Eizenstat, “and exactly half of all my lessons have been from the Hebrew text, and the other half from the New

Testament. So I knew history; I knew the background; and I had a strong religious motivation to try to bring peace to what I call the Holy Land.”

But as Mr. Eizenstat details in his own memoir, Carter’s encounter with the Bible didn’t translate into an affection for the Jews who lived in their historic homeland, be it in ancient Judea or in the 20th century, “and the president’s lack of political sensitivity was sometimes breathtaking.” Carter continued to teach Sunday school after taking office. In one class, the president told his students that Jesus had “directly challenged in a fatal way the existing church, and there was no possible way for the Jewish leaders to avoid the challenge. So they decided to kill Jesus.” In another, he said Jesus’ death was brought about “as quickly as could be arranged by the Jewish leaders, who were very powerful.” An Associated Press reporter was on hand for both.

This was the president who hoped to transform the Middle East. At Camp David, Carter pressured Begin to cease all settlement in the regions of Judea and Samaria, preparing for the creation of a Palestinian state. Begin refused to countenance such a state, deeming it a threat to the safety of Israel’s citizens. He further refused to agree to a long-term ban on settlements in the biblical heart of the Holy Land. Yet Begin did ultimately agree to dismantle all settlement in the Sinai so that it could be transferred to Egypt, paving the way for peace.

Strikingly, Begin’s stance angered both Carter and his own allies on the Israeli right. While Carter deemed an agreement with Egypt insufficient, some Israeli politicians saw the ceding of the Sinai as a profound risk. For Begin, however, there was a clear distinction between the Sinai and the West Bank. The former wasn’t part of the Holy Land, and sacrificing it for peace was a risk worth taking. But in his view, agreeing that the most spiritually significant regions in the Bible should be *judenrein* would be a crime against Jewish history.

Begin once asked Carter why, if Jews were free to live in American towns named Shiloh and Bethel, they should be banned from the original sites that are their namesakes. When the prime minister reflected to a more secular member of his party that the Bible didn’t consider the Sinai part of the Holy Land, he received a bewildered response: “What does this have to do with the Bible?”

Begin’s view prevailed at Camp David: There would be peace with Egypt, and he agreed to work toward Palestinian autonomy but not an independent state. William Quandt, a member of Carter’s team, reported that Begin was “skillful in his tactics, clear in his objectives, and tenacious in negotiating with two formidable leaders.”

His vision also prevailed in Israel, where almost everyone now sees a Palestinian state as an existential threat to the Jewish one. And to a considerable extent it seems to have prevailed in America, where congressional leaders such as Mike Johnson and cabinet nominees like Marco Rubio and Pete Heston speak openly of the role their Christian faith plays in their love for Israel and their concern for its future.

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