The Prime Ministers—An Intimate Narrative of Israeli Leadership
by Yehuda Avner
(Jerusalem: The Toby Press, 2010), 715 pages

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This is at once an absorbing book and an important documentary source for future historians. As a career diplomat, Yehuda Avner served with distinction as Israel's ambassador in Britain, where his upbringing in 1930s and '40s Manchester gave him a special, but by no means uncritical, sensitivity to English attitudes. But much more unusually he worked in the offices of five prime ministers: Levi Eshkol, Golda Meir, Yitzhak Rabin, Menachem Begin—and for a brief and much less happy period not dwelt on in *The Prime Ministers*—Shimon Peres. In the process, Avner acquired enough intimate knowledge—and thanks to his assiduous note-taking and ample detailed recollection—to provide warm and freshly illuminating appreciations of the first four.

Most of the book is an insider's account of high politics in Israel, and between Israel and the US. It is a reflection of his uniquely well placed vantage point for the twenty years after he first went to work as a speechwriter for Eshkol, a man he depicts as demonstrating much greater shrewdness and decisiveness before and during the Six-Day War than popular myth has allowed. But it is leavened by numerous and vivid anecdotal interludes, from his early life in Jewish Manchester to the excitement for a young Zionist of being a firsthand witness to the tumultuous wartime period before and after the establishment of the Israeli state. It includes a chance meeting in Jerusalem with an unswervingly anti-Likud Isaiah Berlin after Begin's 1977 electoral triumph and a lively account of a lunch given by Prince Charles and Princess Diana for Shimon Peres during Avner's London ambassadorship. The book includes a graphic recollection of a conversation at a Hampton Court reception during his time as ambassador with a nakedly antisemitic English baroness "with the face of a haughty Pekinese" (would that he could remember her name) who explains to Avner that Thatcher has several Jews in her cabinet because she "is most comfortable among the lower-middle class."

For all this, the book is principally the portrait of the prime ministers, as suggested in its title—and of Begin first and foremost. Avner makes no secret of his view that Begin, whom he first heard speak (in Tiberias in 1949) while he was working as a founder-volunteer on Kibbutz Lavi, was the most "exceptional" of them all. Yet by Avner's own account, after Likud's 1977 election victory, he hesitated before going to work for Begin. Avner describes, in a tantalizingly rare reference to his own views, that during the interview during which the new prime minister urged

him to stay on, the unspoken thought that occurred to him was that:

> I've always thought we should agree to territorial concessions—a piece of land for a piece of peace." But those words never came out because my throat went dry… because those words were not my own; they were Eshkol's, they were Golda's, they were Rabin's. They were the essence of the speeches I had written for almost twenty years…Now I needed to find my own voice, sort out my own thoughts, arrange them in my own way, and speak them in my own name…

He asked for—and was graciously granted—more time by Begin. He consulted his previous boss Yitzhak Rabin, who, with equal grace, told Avner that Begin was an "honest" and "responsible" man who "always put the national interest above his own." Besides, Rabin added correctly: "He's your kind of Jew. You'll enjoy working with him." Certainly the observant Avner was impressed by what he calls "the depths of Menachem Begin's reverence for Jewish tradition, his cozy acknowledgement of God, his familiarity with ancient customs, and his innate sense of Jewish kinship." Whether, during his loyal service to Begin, he also came to jettison those earlier, if avowedly second-hand, views in favor of "territorial concessions," Avner is too much of the old school civil servant to say. But there is an interesting, if melancholy, coda in the book from the end of Avner's service in Canberra—his last substantial conversation with Rabin, for whom he would surely have gone back to work, if four days after the interview the Israeli leader had not been assassinated. Avner had asked Rabin straight out, "why did you shake Yasir Arafat's hand?" Rabin replied that he faced a choice between "a long shot for a possible settlement, or the certainty of no settlement at all, at a time when the radicals are going nuclear."

But for all Avner's clearly deep admiration and affection for Rabin, it was Begin who was his true hero. Unsurprisingly, therefore, though his account is by no means sanitized, Avner is better on Begin's strengths than his deficiencies. The focus on Begin and Rabin as the most important of the post-Six-Day War prime ministers during Avner's time as an official is certainly amply justified, given that they were the only ones to negotiate peace treaties, with Egypt and Jordan, respectively. The treaty with Egypt was sealed in Begin's case by the withdrawal from Sinai, which demanded considerable political courage and determination in the face of powerful opposition from elements of the right. It is impossible, too, not to be impressed, even moved, by the closeness forged between Begin and both Anwar Sadat and his wife Jehan. Vivid evidence of this intimacy is contained in the latter's eloquently warm letter of condolence, quoted in full, along with Begin's reply, after the death of Begin's beloved wife, Aliza. Avner dwells much less on the failure to make progress even on the declared but limited objective of

autonomy for the Palestinians than Begin's determination, once the treaty with Egypt had been signed, to restate Israel's explicit intention to continue claiming sovereignty in the West Bank and Gaza after the planned five-year transitional period had ended. Part and parcel of this was the stepping up of settlement activity in the West Bank—a combination that saw the successive resignations from the Cabinet of Moshe Dayan and Ezer Weizman.

On the issue of Lebanon, Avner provides interesting detail about the conversation in which Dr. Yosef Burg expressed his serious doubts about full-scale war. However, he dwells far more on the public and diplomatic defenses of Operation Peace for Galilee mounted by the prime minister than on internal tensions, particularly over the conduct of Defense Minister Ariel Sharon and the growing doubts Begin may have had about it, which he expressed to the author. It was also at this time that Begin made his famous statement in the wake of the massacre at Sabra and Shatila, "Christians massacre Muslims and *goyim* blame the Jews." Nor does Avner shed any light on the unwise telegram—or whether it fell to him to draft it—that Begin sent to President Ronald Reagan comparing the onslaught on Beirut to the allied forces massing before Berlin in 1945.

As Avner himself says, the book is not a "conventional biography or memoir." He explains in his introduction that he has "taken certain story-telling liberties," including in "reasonable constructs of conversations." Certainly he uses more direct speech, beyond that recorded in the official transcripts and the copious personal notes on which he draws, than a historian would regard as strictly justified. But there is no reason to doubt the basic authenticity of his account. Rather, occasionally he lets the "verbatim" accounts run on further than they need, for example, in accounts of long-forgotten press conferences, or meetings of no lasting significance. (The book could have done with a more ruthless editor.) But this is a small price to pay for such gems as the account of a private discussion between Rabin and then-opposition leader Begin about the Gush Emumim demonstrators who had been tormenting Kissinger in Jerusalem with slogans like "Jew-boy go home" and "Hitler spared you so you could finish the job." Rabin fulminates against the "unadulterated Jewish antisemitism" of "religious chauvinists" who "are ruining the chances of peace"; Begin defends them—while acknowledging their "sometimes overzealous behavior" as the "salt of the earth …..the last vestige of our pioneering elite." It is hard to imagine dialogue in a play more dramatically conveying the ideological divide at the heart of the Israeli politics of the times.

However, it is in its very detailed accounts of relations with Washington that the book is most valuable and stimulating—especially at a time when another US president is seeking yet again to forge a lasting peace. In his account of the Carter–Begin relationship, while there is no doubt where Avner's sympathies

lay, he is too meticulous a chronicler not to make the reader aware how skillfully—and how knowledgeably—if only half successfully, the last first-term Democratic president to make the Middle East a priority dealt with an Israeli prime minister who was so often the staunchest of adversaries. On the one hand, it is striking how many of the same differences exist between Washington and Jerusalem three decades later. On the other, it is tempting to wonder how permanent is the—still evident—capacity of a determined Israeli government to resist pressure from its most important ally.

Though Henry Kissinger is clearly not an Avner favorite, he quotes the former US secretary of state's observation that "it takes a special brand of heroism to turn total dependence into defiance, to insist on total support as a matter of right rather than as a favor, to turn every American deviation from an Israeli Cabinet consensus into a betrayal to be punished rather than a disagreement to be negotiated." Kissinger went on, however, to argue that tiresome as it was, this relationship between the superpower and the "regional mini-state" served the interests of both, because a more subservient one would prompt an "escalation of demands" by Israel's neighbors and a heaping of opprobrium on the US when they were denied.

It is impossible not to wonder—at least in the long term—how stable the geopolitical underpinning of this doctrine is. Avner's book underlines how often, especially in his dealings with Reagan, Begin invoked the Soviet threat to US interests in the region when defending Israel's actions. That argument, now that the Cold War is over, has often been replaced by Israel's self-projection as a bastion of Western values against Islamic extremism. Yet, now that the US has itself become directly embroiled in a series of military struggles in the Muslim world, this has become less clear cut.

Kissinger stated that Israel was often able to get its way through "inspiration" and "persistence" but also "through a judicious, not always subtle or discreet, influence on our domestic policy." But whether that influence will be increasingly tempered by alternative voices in American Jewry—well disposed to Israel but prepared to differ from its government over where its best interests lie—is one of the more interesting questions for both US politics and Israeli foreign policy in the years ahead. This is not part of Avner's book, which mainly covers the period in Israel's history—and Avner's own public life—that ended with Begin's resignation. But *The Prime Ministers* lays a rich and accessible historical foundation from which the reader can reflect on this and many other questions.