

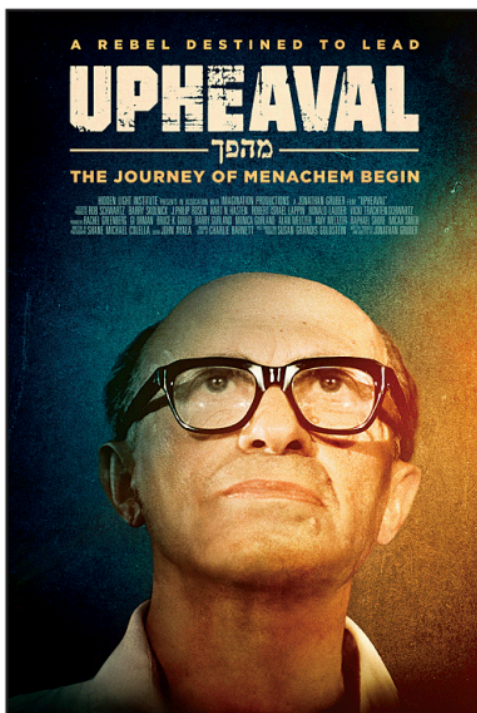
Menachem Begin – Hero, Mentor, Role Model and Close Friend

BY JUDY FLEISCHER

Indianapolis businessman Hart Hasten remembers the first time he heard the name of Menachem Begin, the Israeli prime minister who in 1979 forged a groundbreaking peace with Egypt that won him the Nobel Peace Prize. Hasten heard about Begin not in Israel or even in the United States, but in a displaced persons' camp in Austria in 1946 at the end of World War II. Hasten's extended family – aunts, uncles, cousins – had perished in the Holocaust. Only he, his parents and his brother had managed to survive, having fled their Polish *shtetl* four years earlier – in a horse and buggy. They ended up in Kazakhstan and later, in a DP camp in Austria.

There, the 15-year-old Hasten heard about Begin, who was then the leader of the *Irgun*, a paramilitary organization that was fighting to free Palestine from British control and to establish an independent Jewish state and a refuge for European Jews. Inspired, both Hasten and his older brother, Mark, joined the organization. Mark, in fact, went to Israel with the *Irgun*, was aboard the ill-fated *Altalena*, which was ordered sunk by David Ben Gurion, and fought in Israel's War of Independence as a member of the Israel Defense Force.

For Hart Hasten, who went on to develop a close friendship with the late prime minister, Begin is a hero.



Center in Jerusalem, the film will premiere at the Heartland International Film Festival.

The documentary is at the heart of a larger effort to educate young Jews, many of whom know little about Israel or the struggles that led to its founding. The sponsors hope that it will motivate them and others to take action at a time when anti-Semitism and violence against Jews have once again made their appearance in Europe as well as the United States. To that end, HLI is creating a companion curriculum in five languages for high school and college students and is planning a campaign to motivate students to work against rising anti-Semitism. The Institute also plans to host a biennial peace symposium that will examine the life and legacy of Menachem Begin and focus on key policy issues he addressed that are still topical today.

"There are lessons there for leadership during these trying times," said Hasten.

The anti-Semitism that Begin faced in war-torn Europe, his flight to Israel and his dedication to the Jewish people is a familiar story to Hasten, who after the war, in the 1950s, emigrated to the United States, eventually settling in Indianapolis.

"I was stateless, homeless, powerless, jobless and penniless – not figuratively speaking, not metaphorically speaking, but literally, I had not a penny," said Hasten.

Mark Hasten, who followed his brother to the United States some years later, joined Hart Hasten's business in Indianapolis and over the years, the two brothers together built successful businesses in health care, real estate and commercial banking and became leaders of the Jewish community, founding the Hasten Hebrew Academy of Indianapolis and supporting

many Jewish causes and organizations. Mark Hasten died February 28, 2020.

For all the inspiration that he drew from Begin as a teenager, it wasn't until 1970, 25 years after first hearing Begin's name, that Hart Hasten met the man in person, in Chicago at an event organized to raise money for Israel Bonds. Speaking in Yiddish and English, the two bonded and began to develop a close friendship, nurtured by Hasten's many subsequent visits to Israel and Begin's diplomatic forays to the U.S.

Hasten remembers visits to Washington where he greeted the prime minister as he returned exhausted from contentious talks with President Carter, always asserting that "Jerusalem isn't on the table."

Indeed, Hasten himself appears several times in the documentary, which describes Begin's birth in a Polish *shtetl* and follows his development as a young student and committed Zionist. It chronicles his imprisonment by the Russians and his eventual release and journey to Palestine in 1942 where he led the *Irgun*, became a member of the *Knesset* and, in 1977, was elected prime minister. It ends with his resignation and his retreat from public life after the death of his wife and the conclusion of the problematic war in Lebanon.

It doesn't sugar coat the contradictions in Begin's character or the controversies that dogged him, such as the Israeli-Lebanese conflict, the bombing of the King David Hotel and the *Altalena* affair, all of which resulted in many deaths, including those of Jews. Still, the message of the film is one of courage, leadership and the lasting impact Begin made on Israel and the Jewish people.

Today, 28 years after his death, one of Hasten's most precious possessions is a picture of the prime minister given to him by Begin himself in August of 1980 and signed in Hebrew and English, "To My Dearly Beloved Friends, the Hasten family."

"There's not a day that goes by that I don't think of Menachem Begin," said Hasten.

To purchase tickets for *Upheaval: The Journey of Menachem Begin*, premiering at the Heartland Film Festival, visit: <https://bit.ly/2SWfF5x>. Tickets are on sale through October 18. ✪



Menachem Begin and Hart Hasten.

"He was my hero, my mentor, my role model," said Hasten, who is president of the Friends of the Menachem Begin Heritage Foundation. "I modeled my life after Menachem Begin because of his honesty, his integrity and his pride in being a Jew."

Today, he is honoring the man in another way, as an executive producer of a new documentary film, *Upheaval: The Journey of Menachem Begin*, about Begin's life and the values and beliefs that inspired him. Produced by a partnership of the Denver-based Hidden Light Institute (HLI), of which his son, Bernard Hasten, is the chair, and the Menachem Begin Heritage



Fast friends, Hart Hasten and Menachem Begin share a laugh in Prime Minister Begin's office in Jerusalem in 1980.