

Political Zionism and Covenantal Judaism:  
Zionist Perspectives from Herzl to Begin  
An Honors Writing Course

Throughout its history, two different facets of the Zionist project have either existed in tension with each other, or complemented one another. On the one hand, Israel is, and seeks to be, a flourishing democratic state that makes manifest the modern Jewish right to national self-determination. On the other hand, Zionism has long claimed to represent the covenantal, religious longings of Jews over millennia. The goal of this course is to examine how these two facets of the Zionist project are reflected in the worldview and career of one of the most influential leaders of modern Israel: Menachem Begin. The course will first trace the roots of modern Zionism in general, and Revisionist Zionism in particular, by focusing on the writings of Theodore Herzl and Ze'ev (Vladimir) Jabotinsky. We will then focus on some of the seminal and controversial moments in Begin's life, beginning with those that occurred before his election as Prime Minister: the revolution against the British mandate; the tensions between Begin and Ben-Gurion and the Altalena incident; the debate over whether the nascent State of Israel should accept reparations from Germany; Knesset discussions over the role religion would play in defining the national culture of the state; and the unity cabinet during the Six Day War. The second part of the course will examine moments in Begin's administration that continue to impact Israel today: The peace treaty with Egypt;; the strike against the Iraqi nuclear reactor; and the Lebanon war.

Throughout the seminar, students will be asked to confront, and discuss, several important questions: What is the difference between a "state of the Jews," and a Jewish state"? Can one create a state that is simultaneously democratic while remaining profoundly Jewish? Is there a tension between the modern political notion of "social contract" and the biblical concept of *berit* on which Judaism was founded? How should a Jewish state balance religious or historical values with national security needs? How should a Jewish state balance its responsibilities to all its citizens with the bond that Jews all over the world share? What can the lives of Herzl, Jabotinsky and Begin teach us about political leadership in general, and Jewish leadership in particular?

At intervals throughout the course, students will be asked to compose significant essays- three in all- reflecting serious engagement with these questions via a careful reading and analysis of the syllabus sources. These reflections will be further assisted and enhanced by visits to class by prominent academics, historians, thinkers and national security experts. Toward the conclusion of the course, students will also be required to draw on the academic experience of the

semester in preparing and delivering an oral presentation on the subject of Jewish statesmanship and leadership.

**Topic 1: Herzl and the Birth of Modern Zionism**

Herzl, Theodore. *The Jewish State*.

**Topic 2: Jabotinsky and Revisionism**

Katz, Shmuel. *Lone Wolf: A Biography of Vladimir Jabotinsky*, selections.

Halkin, Hillel. *Jabotinsky*, selections.

Jabotinsky, Vladimir. "The Iron Wall,"

*Guest Scholars: Douglas Feith and Hillel Halkin*

**Topic 3: Zionism in Fiction: Jabotinsky and Herzl as Novelists**

Herzl, Theodore. *The Old-New Land*

Jabotinsky, Ze'ev. *The Five*.

*Guest Scholar: Ruth Wisse*

**Topic 4: Begin and Jabotinsky, Begin vs. Jabotinsky**

Begin, Menachem. *White Nights*, Selections

Begin Menachem. *Mori Ve-Rabi: Essays in Memory of Ze'ev Jabotinsky*, selections

Begin, Menachem. "Ve-Ha-Kohanim Ve-ha'Am"

**Topic 5: Begin and the Irgun**

Begin, Menachem. *The Revolt*, selections

*Guest Scholar: Daniel Gordis*

**Topic 6: Zionism and Inter-Jewish Strife: The Altalena**

Begin, Menachem. *The Revolt*, selections.

Rosenzweig, Franz. *The Star of Redemption*, selections

**Topic 7: National Necessity vs. National Pride: The Reparations Controversy**

Begin, Menachem. Selected Knesset speeches.

Joseph Soloveitchik, *Five Addresses: Lectures on Religious Zionism*

**Topic 8: The Six Day War and the Making of Modern Israel**

Michael Oren, *Six Days of War*, selections.

**Topic 9: The 1977 Election: Sephardim and Ashkenazim, Religion and State**

Gordis, Daniel, *Menachem Begin: A Biography*, selections

*Guest Scholar: Ambassador Yehuda Avner*

**Topic 10: The Osirak Operation: Israel in the Nuclear Age**

Guest Scholar: Elliott Abrams

**Topic 11: The Lebanon War and the Current Middle East**