

Great Controversies



**The Modern
State of Israel**

**Haganah, Irgun and
Lechi: Fighting for
the Land**

**Rabbi Yechezkel
Freundlich**

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The Irgun and Hagannah

Rabbi Yechezkel Freundlich

- A. Origins of the Haganah
 - a. Early 1900s, Jews are returning in significant numbers, to an Arab controlled land, part of Ottoman Empire
 - b. HaShomer formed 1909 to protect kibbutzim and farmers of the Yishuv (replacing the need to hire Arab watchman or rely on other foreigners)
- B. League of Nations, formed at end of WWI, noble goal of preventing another world war and resolving major world disputes
 - a. The formal objective of the League of Nations Mandate system was to administer parts of the defunct Ottoman Empire, which had been in control of the Middle East since the 16th century, "until such time as they are able to stand alone." The mandate document formalized the division of the British protectorates - Palestine, to include a national home for the Jewish people, under direct British rule, and Transjordan, an Emirate governed semi-autonomously from Britain under the rule of the Hashemite family
- C. Arab riots of 1920-21 made clear the Jews would need to do more to protect themselves
 - a. Haganah was formed in 1920 and functioned until 1929 without much central authority or leadership
- D. Arab riots of 1929
 - a. started over tensions at the western wall, spread to Hebron
 - i. the Haganah's role changed dramatically. It became a much larger organization encompassing nearly all the youth and adults in the Jewish settlements, as well as thousands of members from the cities. It also acquired foreign arms and began to develop workshops to create hand grenades and simple military equipment, transforming from an untrained militia to a capable underground army.
- E. British Government, sensitive to mounting Arab pressures, restricts numbers of Jewish immigrants entering Palestine
- F. Many Haganah fighters objected to the official policy of *havlagah* (restraint) that Jewish political leaders (who had become increasingly controlling of the Haganah) had imposed on the militia. Fighters had been instructed to only defend communities and not initiate counterattacks against Arab gangs or their communities. This policy appeared defeatist to many who believed that the best defense is a good offense.
 - a. In 1931, the more militant elements of the Haganah, led by Ze'ev Jabotinsky, splintered off and formed the Irgun Tsva'i-Leumi (National Military Organization), better known as "Irgun" (or by its Hebrew acronym, pronounced "Etzel").
 - i. Howard Sachar: "The policy of the new organization was based squarely on Jabotinsky's teachings which called for immediate establishment of Jewish State: every Jew had the right to enter Palestine; only active retaliation would deter the Arabs; only Jewish armed force would ensure the Jewish state".
 - ii. "National Sport" was illegal immigration of European Jewry
- G. White Paper, 1939
 - a. Severely restricted Jewish immigration to Palestine, deeply angering the Zionist leadership.

- i. David Ben-Gurion, chairman of the Jewish Agency, set the policy for the Zionist relationship with the British: "We shall fight the war against Hitler as if there were no White Paper, and we shall fight the White Paper as if there were no war."
 - b. In reaction to the White Paper, the Haganah built up the Palmach as the Haganah's elite strike force and organized illegal Jewish immigration to Palestine.
 - c. Approximately 100,000 Jews were brought to Palestine in over one hundred ships during the final decade of what became known as Aliyah Bet. The Haganah also organized demonstrations against British immigration quotas.
- H. World War II
 - a. A basic truce was formed amongst all parties, including the Irgun, with the British, who were engaged in fighting their shared enemy - Nazi Germany
 - b. Lechi (The Stern Gang)
 - i. Avraham Stern, to continue fight against the British during the War, as great an enemy as the Germans
 - 1. Even attempted to ally with Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany
- i. Menachem Begin: Irgun Terrorist Leader or Freedom Fighter
 - a. Born in Poland, 1913 (On Shabbos Nachamu), unusual intellectual capacity, orator and leader, Jewish educated and finished Law School in 1935
 - b. Profoundly affected by personal contact with Jabotinsky: faith, vision, pride, courage, action and Jewish Destiny
 - i. Head of Betar youth movement in Poland and then Czechoslovakia
 - ii. Arrested by Soviets as a British agent, freed when Poland made a pact with the Russians, and later made his way to Israel in 1942 (White Nights)
 - c. 1943 assumes control as Commander in Chief of the Irgun
 - i. The war had turned, it was a matter of time before the Allies won, and an understanding of the atrocities of the Holocaust was beginning to be understood
 - ii. Meanwhile, "newsreels were showing the British Navy intercepting leaking boats of Jewish survivors off the shore of Palestine, and turning them back, or interning them. Some of the pitiful vessels, searching in vain for safe harbor, went down with their wretched cargo. Is it any wonder that a man of the stuff of Menachem Begin, driven by an inexpressible anguish, burst forth, and with more audacity than armory, led his small but well entrenched Irgun underground army in a perilous revolt against the British in Palestine?" (Avner, Prime Ministers, pg 7)
 - d. It was lunacy in 1942-43 to challenge the British, but he did so with one underground message: As long as the British Mandatory barred the gates to suffering Jews desperately needing to emigrate from Europe, Britain would remain the enemy of the Jewish people

We are at the last stage of the war. We stand before a historical decision and the fate of generations . . . There is no longer any armistice between the Jewish people and the British administration in Eretz Yisrael, which hands our brothers over to Hitler. Our people are at war with the [British] regime - war to the end . . . Our fighting youth will not be deterred by sacrifice, torment, blood, and suffering. They will never surrender, nor shall they rest until our days of old are restored, and until our homeland, freedom, sustenance, and justice have been secured . . . This then is our demand: immediate transfer of power to a provisional Jewish government. We shall fight; every Jew in the homeland shall fight. The G-d of Israel, the L-rd of Hosts, is with us. There shall be no retreat. FREEDOM OR DEATH!

Begin, Manifesto of Revolt

- e. Ben Gurion was leader of Jewish Agency who was dedicated to working with the British, waiting out the war in a policy of self-restraint
- J. Operations all carried out from underground cells
 - a. February 12, 1944, Irgun fighters attacked immigration offices simultaneously in Jerusalem, Tel Aviv and Haifa, without casualties
 - b. Followed with attacks on Income tax offices, British Intelligence and Police headquarters (4 simultaneously on motzei Yom Kippur, 1944)
 - c. Begin became the most wanted man (terrorist) in the British Empire
 - i. The British struck back, publically flogging or hanging Irgun fighters they captured, some against regular protocol
 - ii. Begin responded: Flogging for flogging, hanging for hanging
- K. The Hunting Season
 - a. The Haganaah was vehemently opposed to the Irgun's actions, and felt the a threat to the Future Homeland. Initiated a massive persecution of the Irgun, aimed at putting an end to its activities.

The perpetrators of terror, who call themselves the 'Irgun Zvai Le'umi' and 'Lohamei Herut Israel' are traitors!... They must be removed from our classrooms, banished from our workshops! Their propaganda, whether written or spoken, must not be permitted...No refuge must be given to these malefactors in the homes of your parents, relatives and acquaintances! The incorrigible despoilers must be isolated and abandoned, until they are spewed out of the ranks of the Yishuv, until terror ceases and its organization is eradicated.

The Jewish Agency proposes herewith that all persons who are acquainted with any of the terrorists, should immediately inform the police by word of mouth, in writing or by telephone and observe the injunction: 'And thou shalt root out the evil from thy midst'. Fathers who have sons in these organizations should, in the same fashion, inform the police and observe thereby the injunction: 'If a man have a stubborn and rebellious son, he must take him out to the elders and say to them: This our son is stubborn and rebellious, he will not obey our voice. And all the men of the city shall stone him with stones.' Particularly since the English do not intend to do the terrorists any harm. They will hold them for a year or two apart from other people until their surplus energy, which apparently results from overeating and from inactivity and sloth, has cooled down [...] It is time to act for the sake of the Jewish people and the homeland.

Official announcement from the Histadrut Council

- b. Nearly 1200 Irgun fighters (and other political enemies of the haganah) were turned over to the British
- c. Begin prevented a Civil War by insisting that none of his fighters strike back, and exercise only restraint.
 - i. Civil War would end revolt against the British and he believed the Haganah would change course, which they did when the war ended, and in the Summer of 1945 the British elected government made no changes to the white Paper policy
- L. The United Resistance
 - a. In October, Haganah, Irgun and Lechi joined forces
 - b. Carried out 11 missions before disbanding again in 1946, hitting train stations, bridges and police stations in coordinated attacks
- M. Black Sabbath
 - a. To the British, known as Operation Agatha on June 29, 1946
 - b. 17,000 soldiers flooded the country and arrested 2700 Jews, confiscated weapons, and significant information and papers

N. King David Hotel

- a. Joint response to Black Sabbath, carried out by Irgun
- b. 91 people died, including 17 Jews
- c. Ben Gurion declared Irgun to be the enemy of the Jewish people, and soon thereafter the United Resistance disbanded

O. Altalena

An article titled "Terror" in the Lehi underground newspaper He Khazit (The Front) argued as follows:

Neither Jewish ethics nor Jewish tradition can disqualify terrorism as a means of combat. We are very far from having any moral qualms as far as our national war goes. We have before us the command of the Torah, whose morality surpasses that of any other body of laws in the world: "Ye shall blot them out to the last man." But first and foremost, terrorism is for us a part of the political battle being conducted under the present circumstances, and it has a great part to play: speaking in a clear voice to the whole world, as well as to our wretched brethren outside this land, it proclaims our war against the occupier. We are particularly far from this sort of hesitation in regard to an enemy whose moral perversion is admitted by all.

Yitzhak Shamir, one of the three leaders of Lehi after Yair Stern's assassination, argued for the legitimacy of Lehi's actions:

There are those who say that to kill [Clifford] Martin [a British intelligence corps sergeant] is terrorism, but to attack an army camp is guerrilla warfare and to bomb civilians is professional warfare. But I think it is the same from the moral point of view. Is it better to drop an atomic bomb on a city than to kill a handful of persons? I don't think so. But nobody says that President Truman was a terrorist. All the men we went for individually — Wilkin, Martin, MacMichael and others — were personally interested in succeeding in the fight against us.

So it was more efficient and more moral to go for selected targets. In any case, it was the only way we could operate, because we were so small. For us it was not a question of the professional honor of a soldier, it was the question of an idea, an aim that had to be achieved. We were aiming at a political goal. There are many examples of what we did to be found in the Bible — Gideon and Samson, for instance. This had an influence on our thinking. And we also learned from the history of other peoples who fought for their freedom — Russian and Irish the revolutionaries, Giuseppe Garibaldi and Josip Broz Tito.

Begin's speech to the Nation, after Independence was declared

Citizens of the Hebrew Homeland, Soldiers of Israel, Hebrew Youth, Sisters and Brothers in Zion!

After many years of underground warfare, years of persecution and moral and physical suffering, the rebels against the oppressors stand before you, with a blessing of thanks on their lips and a prayer in their hearts. The blessing is the age-old blessing with which our fathers and our forefathers have always greeted Holy Days. It was with this blessing that they used to taste any fruit for the first time in the season. Today is truly a holiday, a Holy Day, and a new fruit is visible before our very eyes. The Hebrew Revolt of 1944-1948 has been blessed with success - the first Hebrew revolt since the Hasmonean insurrection that has ended in victory. The rule of oppression in our

country has been beaten, uprooted; it has crumbled and been dispersed. The State of Israel has arisen in bloody battle. The high way for the mass return to Zion has been cast up.

The foundation has been laid - but only the foundation - for true independence. One phase of the battle for freedom, for the return of the entire People of Israel to its homeland, for the restoration of the whole Land of Israel to its God-covenanted owners, has ended. But only one phase. We should recall that this event has occurred after 70 generations of dispersion and unending wandering of an unarmed people and after a period of almost total destruction of the Jew as Jew. Thus, although our suffering is not yet over, it is our right and our obligation to proffer thanks to the Rock of Israel and His Redeemer for all the miracles that have been done this day, as in those times. We therefore can say with full heart and soul on this first day of our liberation from the British occupier: Blessed is He who has sustained us and enabled us to have reached this time.

The State of Israel has arisen. And it has risen "Only Thus":- through blood, through fire, with an outstretched hand and a mighty arm, with sufferings and with sacrifices. It could not have been otherwise. And yet, even before our state is able to establish its normal governing institutions, it is compelled to fight, or rather, to continue to fight satanic enemies and blood-thirsty mercenaries, on land, in the air and on the sea. In these circumstances, the warning sounded by the Philosopher-President Thomas Masaryk to the Czechoslovak nation when it attained its freedom after three hundred years of slavery, has a special significance for us.

In 1918, when Masaryk stepped out on to the Wilson railway station in Prague, he warned his cheering countrymen: 'It is difficult to set up a state; it is even more difficult to keep it going'. In truth, it has been difficult for us to set up our state. Tens of generations, and millions of wanderers, from one land of massacre to another, were needed; it was necessary that there be exile, burning at the stake and torture in the dungeons; we had to suffer agonizing disillusionments; we needed the warnings - though they often went unheeded - of prophets and seers; we needed the sweat and toil of generations of pioneers and builders; we had to have an uprising of rebels to crush the enemy; we had to have the gallows, the banishments beyond seas, the prisons and the cages in the deserts - all this was necessary that we might reach the present stage where six hundred thousand Jews are in the Homeland, where the direct rule of oppression has been driven out and Hebrew independence declared in at least part of the country, the whole of which is ours.

It has been difficult to create our state. But it will be even more difficult to keep it going. We are surrounded by enemies who long for our destruction. And that same oppressor, who has been defeated by us directly, is trying indirectly to make us surrender with the aid of mercenaries from the south, the north and the east. Our one-day old state is set up in the midst of the flames of battle. And the very first pillar of our state must therefore be victory, total victory, in the war which is raging all over the country. For this victory, without which we shall have neither freedom nor life, we need arms; weapons of all sorts, in order to strike the enemies, in order to disperse the invaders, in order to free the entire length and breadth of the country from its would-be destroyers.

But in addition to these arms, each and everyone of us has need of another weapon, a spiritual weapon, the weapon of unflinching endurance in face of attacks from the air; in face of grievous casualties; in face of local disasters and temporary defeats; unflinching resistance to threats and cajolery. If, within the coming days and weeks, we can put on this whole armour of an undying nation in resurrection, we shall in the meantime receive the blessed arms with which to drive off the enemy and bring freedom and peace to our nation and country. But, even after emerging victorious from this campaign - and victorious we shall be - we shall still have to exert superhuman efforts in order to remain independent, in order to free our country. First of all, it will be necessary to increase and strengthen the fighting arm of Israel, without which there can be no freedom and no survival for our Homeland.

Our Jewish army should be, and must be, one of the best trained and equipped of the world's military forces. In modern warfare, it is not quantity that counts but brainpower and spirit are the determining factors. All of our youth proved that they possess this spirit - those of the Hagana, the Lehi, the Irgun, youth that no other nation has merited. Indeed, no generation since Bar-Kochba and until the Bilu pioneers has seen such spirit. As for brainpower, after 120 generations, the creativity of the Hebrew mind is one of the most developed and unlimited. Our military science will be built up on the Jewish mind and will be the world's best. We will yet achieve strength for we possess the power of the brain.

In order to free our country and maintain our state, we shall need a wise foreign policy. We must turn our declaration of independence into a reality. And we must grasp this fact: that so long as even one British or any other foreign soldier treads the soil of our country, our sovereign independence remains nothing but an aspiration, an aspiration for whose fulfillment we must be ready to fight not only on the battlefield but also in the international arena. Secondly, we must establish and maintain the principle of reciprocity in our relations with the nations of the world. There must be no self-denigration. There must be reciprocity. Enmity for enmity. Aid for aid. Friendship must be repaid with friendship. We must foster friendship and understanding between us and every nation, great or small, strong or weak, near or far, which recognizes our independence, which aids our national regeneration and which is interested, even as we are, in international justice and peace among nations.

Of no less importance is our internal policy. The first pillar of this policy is the Return to Zion. Ships! For Heaven's sake, let us have ships! Let us not be [complacent] poisoned with inertia. Let us not talk empty words about absorptive capacity. Let us not make restrictions for the sake of so-called order. Quickly, quickly! Our nation has no time! Bring in hundreds of thousands. If there will not be enough houses, we'll find tents or even the skies, the blue skies of our land, as a roof. As we have seen from other nations, there is no limit to the sacrifices a fighting nation is prepared to make in order to obtain its homeland and assure its future. We are now in the midst of a war for survival; and our tomorrow and theirs depend on the quickest concentration of our nation's exiles.

And within our Homeland, justice shall be the supreme ruler, the ruler over all rulers. There must be no tyranny. The Ministers and

officials must be the servants of the nation and not their masters. There must be no exploitation. There must be no man within our country - be he citizen or foreigner - compelled to go hungry, to want for a roof over his head or to lack elementary education. 'Remember you were strangers in the land of Egypt' - this supreme rule must continually light our way in our relations with the strangers within our gates. 'Righteousness, righteousness shall you pursue' will be the guiding principle in our relations amongst ourselves.

We will protect our state well, our Israel. It is for these goals and principles, and in the framework of democracy, that the Herut Movement will struggle, arising out of the underground and fashioned by the fighting family, a movement made up of all circles, all exiles, all streams around the flag of the Irgun.

The Irgun Zvai Leumi is leaving the underground inside the boundaries of the Hebrew independent state. We went underground, we arose in the underground, under a rule of oppression in order to strike at oppression and to overthrow it. And right well have we struck. Now, for the time being, we have a Hebrew rule in part of our homeland. And as in this part there will be Hebrew Law - and that is the only rightful law in this country - there is no need for a Hebrew underground. In the State of Israel, we shall be soldiers and builders. And we shall respect it government, for it is our government. We expect that this provisional government and every other government will take care not to surrender to external elements or act in tyranny against internal bodies. The government must protect human and civil rights, without discrimination and favoritism. It shall safeguard the principles of justice and freedom and our house shall shine with fraternity and brotherly love.

The State of Israel has arisen, but we must remember that our country is not yet liberated. The battle continues, and you see now that the words of your Irgun fighters were not vain words: it is Hebrew arms which decide the boundaries of the Hebrew State. So it is now in this battle; so it will be in the future. Our G-d-given country is a unity, an integral historical and geographical whole. The attempt to dissect it is not only a crime but a blasphemy and an abortion. Whoever does not recognize our natural right to our entire homeland, does not recognize our right to any part of it. And we shall never forego this natural right. We shall continue to foster the aspiration of full independence

We shall assume the burden of the vision of complete redemption. There can be no distinction between the nation-state and its homeland. That line of differentiation is artificial. This is not irredentism. We refer to five-sixths of our land, land we need to make bloom, land we need for future generations, land we need for security and peace. We will yet fly the flag of freedom, of peace, of progress. Our soldiers will unfurl that flag over the Tower of David and we will yet plow the fields of the Gilead.

Citizens of the Hebrew State, soldiers of Israel, we are in the midst of battles. Difficult days lie ahead of us. Much blood will be spilled. Fortify yourselves. Strengthen your morale. There is no other way.

We cannot buy peace from our enemies with appeasement. There is only

one kind of 'peace' than can be bought - the peace of the graveyard, the peace of Treblinka. Be brave of spirit and ready for more trials. We shall withstand them. The L-rd of Hosts will help us; He will sustain the bravery of the Hebrew youth, the bravery of the Hebrew mothers who, like Hannah, offer their sons on the altar of G-d. This supreme valor will save us from our enemy and bring us out from slavery to freedom, from the danger of annihilation to safety.

And you, brothers of the fighting family, do you remember how we started? With what we started? You were alone and persecuted, rejected, despised and numbered with transgressors But you fought on with deep faith and did not retreat. You were cast into prison and you were exiled from your country but your spirit was not crushed. You were driven to the gallows but went forth with a song. You have written a glorious page in history. You will not recall past grievances; you will ask for no reward.

But for the time-being, let us think of the battle, for only the outcome of the battle will decide our fate and future. We shall go on our way into battle, soldiers of the L-rd of Hosts, inspired by the spirit of our ancient heroes, from the conquerors of Canaan to the Rebels of Judah. We shall be accompanied by the spirit of those who revived our nation, Zeev Benjamin Herzl, Max Nordau, Joseph Trumpeldor and the father of resurrected Hebrew heroism, Zeev Jabotinsky. We shall be accompanied by the spirit of David Raziell, greatest of our Hebrew commanders of our day; and by Dov Gruner, one of the greatest of Hebrew soldiers.

We shall be accompanied into battle by the spirit of the heroes of the gallows, the conquerors of death. And we shall be accompanied by the spirit of the millions of our martyrs, our ancestors tortured and burned for their faith, our murdered fathers and butchered mothers, our murdered brothers and strangled children. And in this battle, we shall break the enemy and bring salvation to our people, tried in the furnace of persecution, thirsting only for freedom, for righteousness and for justice.