

Menachem Begin on Whether to Accept Reparations from Germany (7 January 1952)

Knesset Debate. "Reparations from Germany," Sitting 38, 7 January 1952

Distinguished Knesset,

On March 13, 1951 the Foreign Minister, Mr. [Moshe] Sharett read before us the memorandum that he sent to the U.S., England, France and Russia on a matter that he titled: "Reparations from Germany".

In the discussion that followed the delivery of that memorandum I tried to share with all the members of the Knesset the emotional experience that I experienced when I read the following:

"There will be no progress in restoring Germany's dignity among the family of nations as long as the issue of reparations to the Jewish People is not settled."

These words cannot be subjected to any interpretation. They are entirely clear. They state that if the reparations matters from Germany to the Jews are arranged, then, according to the opinion of the Government of the State of Israel, it will be possible, very possible, to restore the dignity of Germany as a nation among the nations of the world.

My respected adversaries, at that time you made loud noises, erupted, disturbed and claimed that I libeled him [the Foreign Minister] that he is ready for negotiating with Germany. Elderly Rabbi [Mordechai] Noruk had avowed then the Foreign Minister not to execute this "national crime" of getting in touch with Germany. And now, the Government intends to go to the Nazi city of Bonn. Mr. Ben-Gurion you have scolded in the past a member of the Knesset that went to Berlin and you said [to him]: "You travelled to Nazi Berlin". Is Berlin a Nazi city and Bonn not? The fact that Western Germany is a democracy nowadays does not exonerate it from its Nazi past.

You may say that [Chancellor] Adenauer's Government is a new German Government, not a Nazi one; you should know who Adenauer is. I ask: In what concentration camp was he imprisoned when Hitler ruled Germany, what prison was he thrown into as a result of the bloody regime of the Nazis? I ask: Who are Mr. Adenauer's assistants? The answer: Half of the employees at Adenauer's Foreign Office are members of the Nazi Party. And with these people you are going to negotiate – with Ribbentrop's "specialists"; with the "experts" of Weizsacher, with the murderers who laid down the ground for the annihilation of millions of our brethren while telling the whole world that the persecution of Jews is "horrendous propaganda"?

And you might say that with this [German] Government that is ready to give us part of its assets it is possible to negotiate because it does not bear responsibility for the murder? Let me remind you of some facts. 16 million Germans voted for Hitler before he became a ruler. There were 12 million communists and social-democrats in Germany. Where did they disappear? The German army had 12 million soldiers. Millions served in the Gestapo, the S.A. and the S.S. From a Jewish stand point there is not a single German who is not a Nazi, and there is no single German who is not a murderer. And to these people you go to receive money from?

You argue: if we will not take these assets we shall leave them in the hands of the thief. But the numbers have been already published. You expect to receive as much as 300 million dollars in German-Nazi goods. You have estimated the Jewish assets to be six billion dollars. The meaning of these negotiations is that you will obtain 5% of the robbed Jewish assets and leave 95% of those assets in the hand of the robber. Who appointed you? Who authorized you? Were you given the power of presentation from those who are not with us any longer?

Who are you going to demand the assets from? I shall bring a simple example: Simon set fire to the house of Ruben's father and Ruben's father died in the raging flames. What does Ruben do? He might give up the house where his father burned to death. He might go to court and appoint himself a prosecutor in a civil law suit and demand that he should be compensated for the value of the house. But in what untamed tribe will you witness the son of the murdered person demand the value of the house from the murderer? But in your view, the orphans who lost their parents go directly to the murderer. Not to demand "ransom" as you say, but supposedly to receive the value of the homes in which your parents were burned to death. In what uncivilized tribe can you witness such a disgusting act? What are you wishing to turn the People of Israel into – people who nurtured and taught culture for 4,000 years?

The Israeli Government set the foundation for these negotiations with Nazi Germany by that letter of Mr. Sharett.

But there is a second foundation to the bridge upon which Mr. Sharett crossed from Jewish Jerusalem to Nazi Bonn. And this additional foundation is the message of Mr. Adenauer himself. You are entitled to have this letter read to you in its original language, the one written by the agent of crime that mediates Adenauer negotiations with you. But this Chamber, as long as it did not yet decide to accept a fatal resolution – that is not just applicable to me but to all of us, not for a few years but for generations to come – the Chamber's dignity is dear to me and therefore I'll read this message in Hebrew. And this is what Mr. Adenauer said:

"I hereby affirm that the majority of the German people rejected those crimes. I also assert that the German people for the larger part did not participate in these crimes."

And Mr. Adenauer also said: the German Government will be ready, together with representatives of the Jewish People and the Government of Israel, to solve the problem and fix all that have been distorted – in his contaminated language "Remedying the distortion" – of the material aspect of the problem in order to ease the search for the purification of the *soul of suffering that has no boundaries*.

One Knesset member blamed you, Mr. Sharett and you, Mr. Ben-Gurion, that you held this tainted letter in secrecy until Mr. Adenauer read it to his Nazi advisors. If this is true then this is a sorrowful case for us all. You read, and you accepted as groundwork for negotiation with the Germans a proposal that suggests that the majority of the German people rejected those crimes and did not partake in them. You have received as a basic premise for negotiations that this money will be given to you for "soul purification of endless suffering". And if you have not read it why did Mr. Sharett regard this letter as a commencement for negotiations? And if you read and approved [the letter] then the people of Israel should know upon what bridge the ties between Nazi Germany and the Jewish city of Jerusalem have been founded. Adenauer's letter was read by millions of Germans, millions of Americans and millions of Frenchmen. This letter

penetrated into the hearts of the gentiles. All of the world's nations knew: this would be the base upon which you will receive money as "payment for endless suffering". How would they observe us? And would they not regard us with scorn? Who are we submitting our blood to? Your reservations will be written in Hebrew – but who is going to read them. The gentiles will be able to observe only a single fact: you have sat around the same table with the murderers of your people; you have admitted that they are qualified to sign an agreement and fulfill it; that they are a nation – a legitimate nation in the family of nations.

The gentiles not only hated us, not only burned us, and were not just jealous of us – but they have mainly despised us. And in this generation of ours that we call the *last of bondage and first of redemption* – in this generation that we have been privileged to gain back our dignity, in which we emerged from slavery to freedom – you are ready, for few millions of contaminated dollars and for impure goods, to deprive us of dignity that we have earned.

Soon you may even establish a company to be named "Ger-Pal" (as in the initials of German-Palestine) and distribute the German goods in England, France and the United States. You will become Nazi agents; distributors of Nazi merchandise. And how the gentiles will take pleasure in mocking us when a Jew, an emissary of the Government of Israel, will stand in his shop in Argentina and declare: Come buy this merchandise, it is of good quality; it is "Made in Germany". By doing so you undermine our foundation, you endanger our national dignity and independence. How they would [the gentiles] scorn and despise us!

And what is the international background during which this is happening?

Our capable Ambassador to the United States used the term "Renewed Germany". Indeed, Germany is undergoing renewal process. We are witnessing a population of 50 million here [in West Germany] and of 25 million there [in East Germany]. Its industry is flourishing. [West] Germany produces 19 million tons of steel per year – these are the achievements of the "renewed Germany". Churchill devoted half of his book to describe the blindness and the stupidity that led to the rearming of Germany that resulted in WWII. And nowadays he leads the parade for the rearmament of Germany. Out of blindness and deep fear the once removed fangs and claws are once again being reinstated at the Teutonic wolf-pack. And are we going to be a partner to this? Are we to declare that they are a nation, capable of negotiation, being able to comply with an agreement that will be co-signed by the United States and England?

Mr. Ben-Gurion, if instead of talking about the demise of the American Zionists you'd mobilize the American Jewry to explain to the American people about the danger that they themselves will be facing by rearming this pack of wolves – then the situation may have been different. If this magnificent [American] Jewry would rise up to the occasion and say: Germany will not be rearmed – then the situation would have been different. Maybe it is still possible to prevent this disaster from happening. But you joined hands with the assimilated Jews, and with the assimilated (?) ones, their wealth stands in contradiction to bravery and their loyalty to Zion. And so said one of the leaders of the assimilated: "If the [Israeli] Government decided to rearm Germany – it is not our concern." These are your partners.

It is troubling that we witness five years after the war [WWII] has ended how the German-Nazi murderers rise back on their feet and acquire weapons. Today they still speak softly with the Americans and the French; but soon, once it becomes somewhat more powerful, it will sound his true voice.

But all arguments are redundant. Why the calculations, why the rationalizations? After all there is only one account – that of the Jewish blood. There is only one reasoning: Jews, representatives of the Government of Israel are about to sit around one table with the Nazi murderers.

Thus, I will conclude my remarks with few appeals: My first appeal is to you, Mr. Ben-Gurion. I appeal to you not as a political nemesis – as there is a deep chasm between us with no bridge and there will be no bridge because our chasm is a bloody one. I appeal to you in this last moment as one Jew to another, a son of an orphan People, as a son of a bereaved nation: stop it, don't do such a thing! It is an utmost abomination. Nothing like it have we ever experienced since we became a People. I am trying to provide you with a way out. As an opponent I would not have done so, but as a Jew, I will. Go to our nation and conduct a referendum. Not only because I suggest conducting a popular poll on this issue; not because I think that this matter is even worthy of a vote...The actual vote was already cast in Treblinka and Auschwitz where Jews voted in deadly tortures: do not get in touch, do not enter negotiations with the Germans. Go to the people.

After all you do not have a majority in the Knesset on this matter. Some members of your Party object – and I am proud that Jews – though they are my opponents and dislike me – object to these impure negotiations. Members of “Hapoel Hamizrahi” object and so do members of “Hamizrahi” [two religious factions in the Knesset] and so do members of “Agudat Israel” [ultra-orthodox] faction. You are a minority on this matter. So what did you do? You used your arms' strength and threatened Mr. Pinkas [Minister of Transportation] and placed him in an inconsequential post in order to win his support.

D. Z. Pinkas: *Stop talking nonsense. No one scares me. Even Begin does not frighten me despite his bravado.*

[Begin resumes his speech that is directed at the Prime Minister] Go to the people. And if the people will approve and may think that all the sacrifices and the victims were in vain, then you [Ben-Gurion] may say: the nation is behind me, 51% of the people are ready to negotiate with them. But if the people are against it – you will not lose. After all, if you are a believer in democracy, you will then bow your head before the people's will. Why should you decide here and now? After all you do not have a majority. Here is a way out for you. For God's sakes: I call upon you. Search your inner self. Stop. Put the issue in front of all the people – and may God console us.

My second appeal is to the Knesset members who were elected by the Arab citizens of the country. It would be reprehensible of me to prevent them from exercising their official privilege of voting. They do have equal rights. I believe in equal rights and am adherent to the assertion of Ze'ev Jabotinsky, the Head of Beitar [A Zionist revisionist organization and youth movement], and our great mentor: *“The son of the Arabs will enjoy abundance and happiness. The son of Nazareth and my son will look up to my flag – the flag of purity and honesty – that will purify the two banks of my Jordan River”*. You have a formal right to vote on this issue; but you have to make a distinction between formal right and moral right. This is our issue; the blood of our mothers, brothers and sisters is mixed in it. Give us opportunity to solely decide on that matter...

My third appeal is to the Knesset members of the religious factions. You went to your constituents during the election not with this issue in mind. You went to the people for the sake of the Jewish religion; for the dignity of the Torah of Am Israel. But what does the Torah of Am Israel have to do with the negotiations with Amalek? By doing so you might as well erase a holy and sacred verse from the Torah that states that God carries his war against Amalek from generation to generation. How would God fight Amalek if you, the protectors of religion, vote for making peace with Amalek, merely for the sake of receiving money from him?

Today is the 10th of the month of Tevet. It is a day of memorial for all of us, also for my own father. It is a day of national memorial [and the saying of a National Kaddish for the deceased and the victims of the Holocaust]. (Noises and interjection calls are heard from the benches of Mapai).

I stand in front of you, members of the religious factions, as a believer and a son of a believer and beg you: Do not commit this act. Coalition, opposition and human life are not here forever. How could you not see that? Last year you were divided politically over [the issue of] recruitment of religious women to military service. And are you not willing to reject the current matter? Search inside yourselves, your consciousness, and your faith. How could Jewish youth adhere to the Jewish religion and Jewish faith when their spokespeople - their representatives - raise their hands in approval of negotiations with Germany? Therefore, in this last moment get your factions together, sit down and discuss this matter and feel mercy for our nation and do not join this abomination...

And now members of the Knesset of all convictions I know that this is one of the most decisive moments in the history of our people. I know what is awaiting me and my colleagues and I tell you...there will be no negotiation with Germany. There will be no negotiation with Germany! You have claimed that [my] anger is “theatrical”. So here is a list for you: Rabbi Maimon, Rabbi Mordechai Noruk, Professor Klausner, David Shimony, Uri Zvi Greenberg, Dr. Dvorzatzky, Ya’akov Cohen, Avraham Sotzkover – is theirs a stage rage?...

Meeting adjourned at 6:45 PM for recess and reconvenes shortly thereafter.

Chairman Y. Serlin:

I hereby continue the Chamber’s session. I was forced to stop it before because Member of the Knesset [MK] Begin refused to retract from words that he said disrespectfully against the Prime Minister. I duly report to the Chamber that Mr. Begin has retracted from his words against the Prime Minister and from the phrase that if *he [Mr. Begin] is not permitted to speak – no one will.*

I want to take this opportunity to tell the Chamber that I am sorry – and by that I reflect the feelings of all the members – about the behavior during the speeches of both MK Rephael and MK Begin. I hereby appeal to all members: there is still a discussion ahead of us, one that is sharp and penetrating. Hence, it is necessary to keep our calm demeanor; guard the dignity of the Chamber, at least inwardly, and allow the discussion to end regardless of the outcome with due respect to the Knesset and its members.

Permission is granted to MK Begin to conclude his speech.

I confirm the announcement of the respected Chairman. I confirm it not out of pressure, not because of the threats of being expelled from the Knesset. Expelling me carries no weight to

me especially when this battle is raging – I confirm the announcement because I still have a duty to carry on here. I may be the last one but I will fulfill it to its utmost.

In 1919 a tragedy occurred in a small, remote town named Pinsk. An anti-Semitic Polish General gathered 34 Jews, whom he suspected to be Bolsheviks, aligned them along a wall and executed them. I was of tender age then and we were taught to recite a poem about that massacre, I forgot most of the words but there is one sentence that I still remember: *“It is better if you do not come on the eve of Passover.”* The world was different then and was shocked because of the murder of the 34 Jews. Morgenthau came from the United States; special Inquiry Commission was sent from England and the Polish Government - half of whose members were anti-Semites - established a Parliamentary investigative committee. Based on the findings of that committee, the Polish Government offered the grieving families compensations for the fate that befell their deceased family members. Though the Polish Government was not directly responsible for the murder and distanced itself from the event, it offered compensations to the family members. And then – as the book that is laid in front of me tells us – the Zionist Executive Committee of Pinsk told those families:

“If they receive compensation they will betray the memory of the saints and will be disgraced forever. It will be said that the Jews sold the souls of the saints for money. In a protocol that was written there it was emphasized that the spilled blood will not be sold for money and only if the murderers will be punished then their sins will be pardoned. This protocol was signed by the heads of the families of the deceased and was sent to the Ministry of the Army and this is how the case came to its conclusion.”

And the Government of the State of Israel cannot comprehend the principle that the Zionist Executive of Pinsk comprehended? Is the Israeli House of Laws [Knesset] unable to comprehend it as well? If you were to have your way you would have the Germans sign a mutual agreement of the following tentative content:

“We, the Germans, who murdered six million Jews, will give you \$300 million over a ten-year period and we agree that you will continue to hate us. We who are responsible for the murder of six millions request no pardon from you.”

If you were successful in having them sign such an agreement the fact will remain that you take money directly from the murderer based on a mutual agreement that derived from a compromise. You demanded a certain amount and they refuse to give the whole amount. They will offer less and you will comply. An agreement will be signed, for everyone to witness, with the murderers and it would be nothing less than ransom.

I came to warn and I do so now: Knesset members of all factions, such matters cannot pass. If there is any meaning to “Kiddush Ha’Shem” [martyrdom for the sanctity of God] or any meaning to the biblical phrase that one would rather die than make an aberration, this is the essence and this is the content. This may be my last speech in the Knesset. And I cannot but tell you some very simple things that come from a bleeding heart – maybe they will penetrate your hearts. We sat with you in this Knesset for three years. We were a minority. You were the majority. These were the results of the election. We accepted this verdict. We did not come to this Knesset from affluent homes and contented lives. My colleagues and I came here after a war [against the British Mandate] that lasted for years. We were persecuted, we were not left in peace and they placed money rewards for our heads. Detectives looked for us all over the country; we

risked our lives 24 times a day. We came out victorious. The oppressor retreated. The State was established in part of our carved homeland and we had elections.

And there was another event before the elections. Mr. Ben-Gurion will remember it. He ordered to shoot at me with cannon. I was standing in the midst of an inflamed ship [Altalena] and saw my brethren, my students falling down, murdered. They had machine guns, mortars and rifles. I gave an order – in the face of the enemy – not to shoot and they obeyed. And during the three years of this Knesset you have passed many resolutions that infuriated us. And afterwards we were deeply saddened and felt compromised – we may have failed our mission. We went to our youth, whom you call in derogatory names – the youth that risked their lives for our people and our country and bled to death. Twelve of these young ones were sentenced to death and stepped up to the hanging platforms singing Hatikva until the last moment of their breathing. I went to many of these youngsters who experienced wars, participated in battles and told them: This is our Knesset. This is our Government, and the majority decides so let us go to the people and try to convince them. And if we fail, what else can we do? This is our nation. I went to the Diaspora and met with thousands of Jews. They are my witnesses. They will prove me right: this government is different. This is our Government – it is a Jewish one. Thank God that we have arrived to the day where we have a Jewish Government. This is our Government. This is my Government. That's what I told the Jews of the United States, Argentina, and Mexico. This is how we educated our youth. We accepted everything despite our anger. We aspired to educate this nation to living in a State, for life of freedom and independence, to have normal life after 2,000 years of exile. Don't we have children too? Don't we have wives? Don't we deserve a quiet family routine? Don't we have some rights to live as free citizens in this country?

After all we gave everything for its establishment and we received nothing – no command posts in the military or the police, no government posts, no position – nothing! We came to you and asked that you will recognize the rights of our fighters as those of other soldiers. And you refused for two years. The Prime Minister said: As long as this Government is in control it will not give a penny to these fighters. But these are fighters who had their hands and their legs amputated – disabled for the rest of their lives, not to mention the grieving families who lost loved ones, whose lives were shattered and became poor. And we even accepted and tolerated this attitude. Once again we went to our youth and said: we shall change their minds and soften their hearts [the leaders of the ruling government]; we shall be able to convince them; it's alright – after all, this is our country.

This is what I taught our youth. That is what I have learned from my parents and my teachers. There are things in life that are dearer than life itself. There are things in life that are more horrific than death. And this is one of those things that we are ready to sacrifice our souls for; it is for what we shall be ready to die. We shall leave our families, we shall say good bye to our children so that there will be no negotiation with Germany.

Nations that are worthy to be regarded as nations fought over barricades for much less significant matters. But on this matter – we, the last generation for slavery and first for redemption; we saw our parents being dragged to the gas chambers; we who heard the sounds of the death trains; we who witnessed how the elderly father was thrown into the river with 500 other Jews from the city of Brisk in Lithuania and the river turned red from their blood; we who saw the old mother murdered in her hospital bed; we who witnessed all those events that have no

parallel in history...are ready to take every action, everything, to prevent this disgrace from Israel. I hope that we will prevent it.

In Zion Square [in Jerusalem] I told the 15,000 people who gathered out of anger in the cold and in the rain: go, surround the Knesset. Do not disturb the discussions inside. All the provocative claims as if we intended to interrupt the Knesset procedures were unsubstantiated. I said: go surround the building like during the Roman times when Jews gathered from all over the country when a Roman Consul ordered to place a statue in the Temple and surrounded it and said: over our dead bodies. I said: your silence will be as loud as screaming so that there will be no negotiations with Germany. But then the authorities have attacked these people with tear gas bombs that were made in Germany and then whatever happened, happened because of it.

And I tell you, my colleagues: how shameful it is that I have arrived at this juncture; and I'm also happy that I have that privilege! There are still youth in Israel. No, these young ones do not want wars, do not aspire for battles, they do not wish to die; they want to live and they have the right to live. But the critical hour has arrived and all is now being put on the scales. Shall we not fulfill this Mitzvah? Yes we will.

This is my final call to the Knesset in an attempt to prevent a calamity from harming the People of Israel. In the bottom of hell we heard the voice of the devil – what else has this nation brought upon itself after its destruction – Jewish blood spilled on German money. Why and for what purpose? The money will be spent and disappear but the shame will remain!

I know that you have the [political] power. You have prisons, concentration camps, military, detectives, guns and machine guns. That is fine. But on this matter all this force will shatter as a piece of glass thrown on a rock. On this honorable matter we shall fight to the end. The physical strength at such instances has no value, no consequence...

I warn, but I do not make a threat. Whom shall I threaten? I know that you will drag us to concentration camps. Today you arrested a few hundred and you may arrest thousands. It is fine. They will be jailed and we shall sit with them. If it is necessary we shall die with them and there will be no reparations from Germany. And may God help us all that we shall prevent the holocaust from our nation, for the sake of our future and our dignity.

Mr. Chairman, please note and inform the authorities of the State [of Israel] that as of 4 PM today, I Member of Parliament with my rights of immunity, regard this law as ceased and deceased.