

**There are a number of people—especially young people—who may never have heard of Menachem Begin. So, who was Menachem Begin?**

Rita: *It's a difficult question to answer. He was a number of people. While a commander in the Irgun underground, he was a tenacious and fearless fighter, who fought to free Israel from the British during their occupation. Once Israel gained its independence, he was a statesman with a distinct vision for his homeland. He helped to start the opposition party Herut in the Knesset. Later, when he became Prime Minister, he was a peacemaker and humanitarian. He was a tremendous orator. And there is little doubt that his crowning achievement was the signing of the first peace treaty between Israel and Egypt.*

**When did you become interested in Menachem Begin?**

Rita: *When my husband and I decided to become citizens of Israel 2012 I read everything I could about the country, its people and its history. Something about Begin's story touched me deeply. His fearlessness when facing danger, the immense suffering he endured throughout his life, the courage he showed time and again while fighting for the Jewish people—all of this fascinated me. I loved reading about his struggle to overcome so many obstacles. He faced incredible odds. But he persevered—driven by the resolve that his cause was just and that the Jewish people had a sacred right to a homeland. To me, he wasn't just an influential man, he was a leader—but a leader directed by his conscience and a moral imperative to create and sustain the state of Israel.*

**What compelled you to paint Menachem Begin?**

Rita: *I understand the world through the act of painting. Painting Menachem Begin seemed like a perfectly natural thing to do. I had read about him, watched videos of him and studied him. I wanted to bring his spirit back into the world. I wanted to capture Begin in paint. We need him now.*

**Why is this a series? Was it always intended to be a series?**

Rita: *I quickly discovered that I couldn't portray Menachem Begin in one painting. I wasn't interested in a simple likeness. I wanted to go deeper. My intent was always to paint something that was animated with different aspects of his personality. I wanted to reveal his strength, his suffering, courage and unique sense of humor. Not just Begin as statesman, but even when he was young. As I started to work and executed five or so portraits, my research began to change, and I searched for material outside of the famous photographs that tended to focus on his public life. My search led me to the Menachem Begin Center and their archives. Rami Shviti and the Center's staff were incredibly helpful. It wasn't long before I realized that each painting I finished was just a study for the next painting.*

**Did you follow a process that directs you while working on this series?**

Rita: *I hadn't planned a series; in fact, I hadn't even planned to exhibit the work. I never know where a painting will take me. I have no formula. That was particularly true with these paintings. Again, I wasn't interested only in likeness. I decided to approach each painting as a new event. Sometimes I wanted to see how minimal I could go and still reveal the essence of the man. I would paint just his mouth and nose, for instance. Other times I painted just his forehead and glasses. I tried different palettes. Sometimes I limited the palette. I painted him in red oxides. I painted him in high-keyed colors. And, then, I painted him in dark tones. Sometimes I limited the brushes I used. Then, I used blues, greys and black because they reminded me of him when he wore a suit and looked like a European gentleman. But these portraits were never about formal experimentation. I was consciously striving to manipulate the formal elements of art to arrive at statements that reflected, above all, authenticity. I admired how authentically Menachem Begin lived his life. He spoke without pretense. He was always direct and without ambiguity of any kind. I wanted my work to reflect that.*

**This series—which you never intended as a series—now stands at 22 (?) paintings. That’s a large body of work. Are you finished?**

*Rita: I've been working on these paintings over the course of 7 years. During that time I could start on a different subject and suddenly find myself painting Menachem Begin. So, am I finished? No, I will always paint Menachem Begin.*

Artist Rita Zimmerman Interviewed by Michael DeMarsche, PH.D., Independent Scholar  
October 25, 2021