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MENACHEM BEGIN מֵנַחֵם בֶּגִין



Born in 1913 in Belarus, Menachem Begin was an aide to Ze'ev Jabotinsky, founder of Revisionist Zionism. Arriving in pre-State Israel, he led the Etzel underground military organization, working in opposition to the more mainstream Haganah. After 1948, he was elected to the Knesset and led the parliamentary opposition until he became Prime Minister in 1977. Begin was a fiery orator who opposed accepting financial reparations from Germany. He believed in the right of the Jewish People to all of the Land of Israel. He surprised many by negotiating a peace treaty with Egypt, Israel's largest and most powerful neighbor. His first official act as PM was to welcome 77 Vietnamese refugees, saying that Israel would never forget when the world refused to help Jews in need during the Holocaust. Heartbroken after the death of his wife, Aliza, in 1982, Begin resigned from office in 1983 and died in 1992.



DAVID BEN-GURION

דָּוִד בֶּן-גּוּרִיּוֹן



“In Israel, in order to be a realist, you must believe in miracles.” David Ben-Gurion declared independence for the Jewish State and became Israel’s first Prime Minister in 1948. One of his early achievements as PM was to create the Israel Defense Forces by merging several pre-State fighting forces into one unified army. He immigrated from Poland in 1906, and later met his future wife, Paula, in New York. He believed that all Jews should participate in building and strengthening the new country, and worked with World Jewry to forge understandings about different kinds of support. While Ben-Gurion was not a religious man, his reverence for Jewish sources and tradition led him to establish Israel’s annual Bible Quiz. He urged Israelis to settle the Negev and make the desert bloom. After retiring from public life, he lived at Kibbutz Sde Boker, where he and his wife are buried.

SHIMON PERES שמעון פרס



Shimon Peres, originally from Poland, began his career in public service as an aide to Israel's first Prime Minister, David Ben-Gurion. Although he never served in the army, he was the first person in charge of Israel's military industry and oversaw the nuclear development program. He served as Prime Minister from 1984-1986 and 2005-2006, and as President from 2007-2014. For much of his career, Peres was viewed as a divisive figure in Israeli society, though his optimism and vision for a bright future never wavered. In his later years as President, Peres was widely respected and came to be viewed as a national grandfather figure. In 1994, he received the Nobel Peace Prize with Yitzhak Rabin and Yasser Arafat for his efforts to bring Israeli-Palestinian peace. When he died in 2016, he chose to donate his corneas to science—so that someone would get his sight and, hopefully, his vision.



GOLDA MEIR

גולדה מאיר



Born in 1898, Golda Meir's family fled from anti-Semitism in the Ukraine and settled in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. She moved to pre-State Israel in 1921, becoming one of two women to sign the Declaration of Independence, and to date the only woman to serve as Prime Minister of Israel. In early 1948, she was sent to the US to raise funds for the nascent State, returning home with \$50 million, making it possible to achieve statehood. She addressed audiences with her ever-present cigarette in hand—but no notes—and urged American Jews to open their wallets and “not be too late.” She served as ambassador to the Soviet Union and Foreign Minister before becoming PM during a period that included the 1972 Munich Olympic Massacre and the 1973 Yom Kippur War. She died in 1978 and is remembered for how she gathered advisors and ministers around her green formica kitchen table, which came to be known as Golda's Kitchen Cabinet.



YITZHAK RABIN

יצחק רבין



Born in Jerusalem in 1922, Yitzhak Rabin was the first sabra, or native-born, Israeli Prime Minister. As a child, he dreamt of becoming a farmer and studied at the Kadourie Agricultural School, but he answered the call of duty and served in the pre-State military effort. As chief of staff of the IDF during the 1967 Six-Day War, he spoke eloquently about the need to balance the joy of victory with the reality of the heavy human toll of the war. He served as PM twice, from 1974-1977 and from 1992-1995, earning a Nobel Peace Prize together with Shimon Peres and Yasser Arafat for the Oslo process. Rabin, who called himself a “soldier for peace,” was assassinated in 1995 by a Jewish Israeli law student at a peace rally in Tel Aviv. The Rabin Center, in Ramat Aviv, documents his life and carries on his legacy.



BENJAMIN (BIBI) NETANYAHU

בִּנְיָמִין נֶתַנְיָהוּ



Born in Tel Aviv in 1949, Benjamin Netanyahu spent many years as a child and young man living in the United States. His late father was a respected historian, and his older brother, Yoni, was killed during Operation Entebbe in 1976. During his stint as Israel's ambassador to the UN in the 1980s, Netanyahu gained prominence as an eloquent, effective spokesman for Israel. He later joined the Likud party and rose to the role of Prime Minister. In 2019, he became Israel's longest-serving premier, filling the role from 1996-1999 and again since 2009. Netanyahu continues to be a strong voice opposing accommodation with Iran and insists on accountability from the leadership of the Palestinian Authority.

RUTH CALDERON רִית קַלְדֶּרוֹן



Ruth Calderon was born in 1961 in Tel Aviv and gained national prominence in 2013, when her first speech as a Member of Knesset went viral on social media. Calderon holds a doctorate in Talmud and has worked for decades to bridge religious-secular gaps in Israeli society. In the speech, she wove personal anecdotes about her upbringing into a plea for mutual respect and cooperation across all parts of Israeli society. She lost her Knesset seat in the 2015 elections, when her Yesh Atid party won just 11 seats. Her work establishing BINA, the first Secular Yeshiva in Tel Aviv, has made religious study accessible to both men and women in Israel, and continues to draw growing numbers of enthusiasts.



Anat Hoffman is best known as the leader of Women of the Wall, a group that has advocated for the rights of women to pray, wear טליתות—tallitot, and read Torah at the Western Wall in Jerusalem for the past several decades. An outspoken advocate for women's rights, religious freedom, and peace, she was a member of the Jerusalem City Council for 14 years and has served as director of the Reform movement's Israel Religious Action Center since 2002. Born on a kibbutz near Jerusalem in 1954, she was an outstanding swimmer who competed in the Maccabiah Games.



Stav Shafir is the youngest woman ever to serve in Israel's parliament, first elected to the Knesset in 2013 at the age of 27. A longtime social activist, she catapulted to national prominence as a leader of the 2011 social protest movement, in which hundreds of thousands of Israelis demanded lower housing prices. Appearances on national television drew the attention of the Labor Party, which approached her about joining their ranks ahead of the 2013 Knesset elections. As a parliamentarian, the charismatic Shafir has focused on demands for financial transparency and social issues, ranging from the cost of living to LGBTQ rights, advocating for religious freedom, asylum-seekers' rights, and other causes.



SALIM JOUBRAN

סלים ג'ובראן



Born in Haifa in pre-State Israel to a Christian-Arab family, Salim Joubran studied law at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and became a judge after 12 years in private practice. In 2003, he was appointed to a temporary position on the Israeli Supreme Court, becoming permanent the following year. While not the first Arab Israeli to serve on the highest court, he was the first to hold a permanent appointment. He was the first Arab Israeli to chair Israel's Central Elections Committee, and earned respect for his legal mind. In 2012, he was criticized for not singing the national anthem Hatikvah. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu defended his right not to sing, noting that he had stood respectfully for the anthem. He retired in 2017 upon reaching the mandatory retirement age of 70, and his seat was filled by another Arab Israeli, George Kara.

THEODORE HERZL

תֵּיאוֹדוֹר הֶרְצֵל



Born to an assimilated Jewish family in Budapest in 1860, Theodor Herzl went on to become the father of the Modern Zionist movement that later led to the establishment of the State of Israel. As a reporter in Paris, he witnessed the Dreyfus Affair—in which a French Jewish army officer was wrongly convicted of treason—and concluded that the Jews needed a national home so that an event like this would never happen again. In 1897, after convening a Zionist Congress, he wrote in his journal that a Jewish state would be founded within 50 years—and exactly 50 years later, the UN voted to establish a Jewish state. He died at the age of 44 and never saw his greatest dream come to fruition, but his contributions played a crucial role in the effort. He was reburied in Jerusalem, atop Mt. Herzl, which was named in his honor.



RABBI ABRAHAM ISAAC KOOK

הרב אברהם קוק



Born in Latvia in 1865, Abraham Isaac Kook became the first Chief Rabbi of pre-State Israel, serving in that post from 1921 until his death in 1935. He immigrated to Jaffa in 1904 and became the area rabbi, where his responsibilities included serving the mostly secular farmers of the surrounding agricultural communities. He became convinced that the pioneering efforts of religious and secular alike were playing a key role in heralding messianic times—a view that put him at odds with some other Orthodox figures. His openness to a wide range of ideas did not change the fact that he was a strict adherent to Jewish law. Around the same time that he became Chief Rabbi, he established Merkaz HaRav Yeshiva in Jerusalem, which remains a respected center of Jewish learning to this day.



NATAN SHARANSKY

נָתָן שָׂרָנְסְקִי



As a young man in the Soviet Union, Natan Sharansky's only crime was that he wanted to live a Jewish life. When he requested permission to emigrate to Israel in 1973, the authorities refused; four years later, he was accused of spying for the CIA and sentenced to 13 years in prison. His wife, Avital, who had been allowed to emigrate, drew attention to his case, and Sharansky became the face of the refusenik movement as Jews and other activists around the world demanded that they be allowed to emigrate. Released in 1986 as part of a prisoner exchange, he immediately moved to Israel, where he became a voice for other Soviet immigrants and later, a fierce advocate for strong ties binding Israel and world Jewry. After working as a Member of Knesset and a government minister, he served as chairman of the Jewish Agency for Israel from 2009-2018.



AYELET SHAKED

אילת שקד



Born in Tel Aviv in 1976, Ayelet Shaked began to embrace right-of-center political views, after watching a televised debate as a child—but it wasn't until her army service that she became politically active. After a career in the technology sector and a stint working for Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, she was elected to the Knesset in 2013 as the only secular Jew representing the religious Jewish Home party and has served as Justice Minister since 2015. She supports bans on public transportation on Shabbat and Jewish holidays, mandatory IDF service for Haredi Jews, and has said that there may need to be some compromises on the rights of non-Jews in the interest of preserving Israel's Jewish character. Haaretz newspaper has said she is “poised to be Israel’s most successful female politician since Golda Meir.”

ILAN RAMON אילן רמון



All of Israel watched in excitement as Ilan Ramon trained with his NASA colleagues after he was selected to be the first Israeli astronaut in space. When the Space Shuttle Columbia went into orbit in 2003, Israeli media followed Ramon's journey. Ramon, whose Air Force career included participating in the 1981 bombing of the Iraqi nuclear reactor, was the first astronaut ever to request kosher food in space, and brought on the Space Shuttle a mezuzah and a Torah that had been rescued from the Holocaust. His regular communications with Israeli media raised awareness and national pride. Looking down on earth from the Space Shuttle, Ramon and another astronaut said they saw no borders and that the view reminded them of John Lennon's song, *Imagine*. He died, along with the other six members of the Columbia crew, when the Space Shuttle crashed upon re-entry.



HANNAH SENESH

חַנָּה סֶנֶשׁ



Hannah Senesh is revered in Israel as a hero. Born in Budapest in 1921, she moved to pre-State Israel at 17 to pursue her dream of building the Jewish State. She studied agriculture, joining the Haganah and Kibbutz Sdot Yam before enlisting in the British Jewish Brigade to fight in World War II. In 1944, she parachuted into Yugoslavia to help rescue Hungarian Jews who were being deported to Auschwitz. She was captured by the Germans, tortured, tried, and put to death by firing squad. Her diary was published in Hebrew in 1946 and her poetry continues to be read and sung to this day. One of her most inspirational songs is הַלִּיכָה לְקִיסְרִיָּה—Halicha L'Caesarea—*A Walk to Caesarea*, commonly known as אֵלִי, אֵלִי—Eli, Eli—*Oh Lord, My God*. Her remains were reburied on Mt. Herzl in Jerusalem in 1950.



ELIEZER BEN YEHUDA

אליעזר בן-יהודה



As a young man growing up in Lithuania and Paris in the second half of the 19th century, there was little reason to believe that Eliezer Ben-Yehuda would become the person most responsible for reviving Hebrew as a modern language. Early on, he became convinced that the Jewish people needed a spoken language of their own in order to thrive. Soon after immigrating to pre-State Israel, he and his wife raised the first child to hear and speak only Hebrew in modern times. He founded a Hebrew language institute and authored the first modern Hebrew dictionary. His success can be seen all over Israel, where Hebrew is the primary language used, and around the world, where learning Hebrew is an important part of connecting to Jewish culture everywhere. Cities and towns all over Israel have streets named in his honor, including the popular pedestrian mall in downtown Jerusalem.



ARIEL SHARON

אַרְיֵאל שָׁרוֹן



Born in a small farming community in pre-State Israel, Ariel Sharon had a long military career before entering Israeli politics. After becoming Defense Minister in 1981 and resigning two years later, he was elected Prime Minister in 2001, serving until 2006. As PM, he focused on restoring personal security and quelling terror attacks against Israeli civilians. He led Israel's 2005 withdrawal from the Gaza Strip and formed Kadima, a pragmatic, centrist political party that drew support from the left and right. He was known for pushing his ideas and agendas relentlessly in all of his military and civilian leadership roles. He suffered a stroke in 2006 that left him in a coma until his death in 2014. His legacy lives on at Park Ariel Sharon, an environmentally sustainable public space that was once a landfill on its way to becoming an ecological disaster.



MOSHE DAYAN

מֹשֶׁה דַּיָּאן



Identifiable by the iconic black eye patch that he wore after a bullet pierced his left eye during World War II, Moshe Dayan was born in Kibbutz Degania Aleph in 1915. As one of the first children born in the new kibbutz, he was treated as a communal baby. His family eventually moved to Nahalal, the first established moshav, or farming cooperative. His long military career began when he served in the Haganah before the establishment of the State, where one of his heroes was pro-Zionist, British army officer, Orde Wingate, who helped train pre-State fighters. He was appointed Defense Minister on the eve of the 1967 Six-Day War, helping to calm the nervous Israeli public when war seemed inevitable and the people feared the military was not prepared. He helped negotiate Israel's 1979 peace treaty with Egypt, which was signed two years before his death.



ALICE SHALVI

אליס שַׁלְוִי



Alice Shalvi was one of the founders of the Israel Women's Network, one of the earliest advocates for women's equality in Israel, long before such efforts were commonplace anywhere in the world. Born in Germany in 1926, her family came to London in 1934, where she gained her education in Jewish and general studies. Moving to Israel in 1949, she began a long career training teachers to teach English as a foreign language. During the 15 years that she headed Pelech, a prestigious, innovative school for religious girls in Jerusalem, she had the opportunity to put her beliefs into action. Enrollment in the school, whose motto was, "no area of knowledge should be closed to women solely on grounds of their sex," grew fourfold during her tenure. She received the prestigious Israel Prize in 2007.



When Ada Yonath received the Nobel Prize in 2009 for her research in the field of ribosomal crystallography, she became the first Israeli woman to win a Nobel—and the first woman to win in chemistry in 45 years. Despite the wall of awards that adorns her office at the Weizmann Institute of Science in Rehovot, she told a reporter that her most honored award is the handmade “Grandmother of the Year” award that her 12-year-old granddaughter gave her a few years ago. Yonath was born in Jerusalem in 1939 to a family that she says was so poor that they couldn’t even afford to buy books, but her parents found the means to send her to good schools to encourage her love of science. She withstood years of criticism from colleagues who said her work had little value. All one needs to do is look at the wall of awards to see that her perseverance paid off.



BENJAMIN (BENNY) GANTZ

בֶּנְיָמִין (בֶּנִי) גַּנְץ



Born in Moshav Kfar Ahim in 1960, Benny Gantz drafted into the IDF as a paratrooper in 1977. Soon thereafter, he served as part of the security detail assigned to Egyptian President Anwar Sadat during his historic visit to Israel. Rising through the ranks of the military, he was appointed Chief of Staff in 2011 until his discharge in 2015. After a brief stint in the business world, Gantz entered politics in 2018, forming the Israel Resilience Party, which joined with Yesh Atid to form Blue and White political party, ahead of the April 2019 elections. Gantz has positioned the party at the center of the political spectrum, attempting to appeal to a wide cross-section of Israeli voters. The party's message has struck a chord with voters, who quickly made it one of the country's largest political parties.



RACHELLE FRAENKEL

רחלי פֿרענקל



When Naftali Fraenkel, Eyal Yifrach, and Gilad Shaar were kidnapped in the West Bank by Hamas terrorists in June 2014, people around the world followed news reports about efforts to rescue the three high school boys. Naftali's mother, Rachelle, a respected Jewish educator working out of the public eye, became a public figure overnight as people were drawn to her calls for unity, love, and hope. When it was revealed that the boys had been murdered, the entire country shared in the families' grief. Fraenkel's response to her personal tragedy was to establish, together with the families of the other two boys, the Jerusalem Unity Prize—a joint initiative with the Mayor of Jerusalem dedicated to fostering unity among the Jewish people. Hundreds of thousands of people in Israel and around the world participate in the annual Unity Day, and each year the prize is awarded in recognition of these efforts.



YONI NETANYAHU

יוֹנִי נֶתַנְיָהוּ



As the leader of the 1976 IDF mission to rescue 102 Jewish passengers being held hostage in Uganda after terrorists hijacked their Air France plane, Yonatan “Yoni” Netanyahu became an iconic Israeli figure. During that historic rescue mission in which he was the only casualty, Netanyahu embraced the IDF ideal of אָחַרַי—Acharai—Follow Me, in which officers lead their troops into battle. Born in New York in 1946 to an ardently Zionist family, Netanyahu’s father, Ben-Zion, was a renowned Biblical scholar and his brother, Benjamin, went on to serve as Israel’s Prime Minister. After his death, the name of the mission was changed from Operation Entebbe to Operation Yonatan in his honor. An eloquent writer, his many letters written throughout his short life to family and friends were published as a book that continues to inspire readers today. His story has been the subject of multiple films and books over the years.



Miri Regev earned a reputation for her outspoken brand of advocacy, with a military career that culminated in her post as IDF Spokeswoman. Since joining the Likud party, she became Minister of Culture and Sport in 2015, openly taking aim at those who criticize Israel. Acknowledging that filmmakers enjoy freedom of speech, she has said that the government also has “freedom of funding,” and should not underwrite films that are critical of the country. She decries what she calls the Ashkenazi-centric cultural elites in Israel, and supports Mizrahi artists. She has been a vocal advocate of fighting the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions movement, an outspoken critic of African asylum seekers, and supports the rights of the LGBTQ community in Israel. She has been one of PM Benjamin Netanyahu’s most loyal supporters, and some believe she sees herself as his eventual successor.



ZE'EV JABOTINSKY

זאב ז'בוטינסקי



Ze'ev Jabotinsky founded the Revisionist Zionist movement and several organizations in pre-State Israel, including the Betar youth movement and the Irgun fighting force. Following the 1903 Kishinev Pogrom, he established the Jewish Self Defense Organization in Odessa and became the leader of right-wing Zionism. Making aliyah to pre-State Israel, he frequently traveled abroad, and died of a heart attack in 1940 while visiting a Betar camp in New York. In his will, he expressed the wish to be buried in Israel, but only if an invitation was issued by the leaders of Israel to be re-interred. The invitation came in 1964 from Prime Minister Levi Eshkol, and Jabotinsky's grave can be found on Mt. Herzl in Jerusalem. His fierce Jewish nationalism, coupled with firm commitment to the rights of minorities, served as guiding principles of the Herut party and later, the original Likud party.



JOSEPH TRUMPELDOR

יוסף טרומפלדור



Known for his famous last words, “טוב למות בעד ארצנו—it is good to die for our country,” Joseph Trumpeldor lost his arm in battle fighting in the Russian-Japanese War. Born in Russia in 1880, after moving to pre-State Israel, he made his home in Kibbutz Degania. The Ottoman authorities expelled him for his refusal to accept Ottoman citizenship. He returned in 1918 and founded Hechalutz, which helped young people plan to move to pre-State Israel. In 1920, he was part of a team defending Tel Hai in the Upper Galilee, and he was killed in battle. He and the others who fell at Tel Hai are buried in a communal grave in Kibbutz Kfar Giladi, where a statue of a lion guards over them.



AHAD HA'AM

אַחַד הָעָם



Ahad Ha'am was born in 1856 in the Russian Empire and given the name Asher Zvi Hirsch Ginsberg. He is the father of Cultural Zionism, a movement that argued passionately that Eretz Yisrael, the Land of Israel, should be a spiritual and cultural center for the Jewish People. He believed Jews around the world should look to the Land as a place for hope and inspiration, but—unlike many other early Zionist thinkers—he did not believe it was crucial to have a sovereign Jewish state. Ginsberg wrote under the pen name Ahad Ha'Am, which literally means, “one of the people,” and his work gained followers—and detractors—throughout the Jewish world. He argued passionately against Herzl's Political Zionism, and urged people to focus on building a society in Eretz Yisrael that would be truly, palpably Jewish in its nature and its values. He visited pre-State Israel multiple times, and lived in Tel Aviv for the last five years of his life until his death in 1927.