

SELF-FLAGELLATION

Yaakov Meridor did not hesitate for a second before he picked up the phone to call the Prime Minister's Residence in late 1983. It was after midnight, but he could not resist. It had been almost four decades since he and Begin had served together in Etzel, and he wanted to report to his "commander" about the historical turning point—that their adversary from the days of the Resistance, Yitzhak Shamir, one of the three leaders of Lehi, had been elected to lead the Likud.

To some extent, Begin and Shamir respected each other. They began their public careers in the Beitar movement, and their loyalty to the Land of Israel was never questioned. But Begin was motivated by justice as he perceived it, while Shamir was motivated by effectiveness. They also differed in their nature, as Begin saw Shamir as a gray man who was not destined for great things, while Shamir was unimpressed by Begin's tendency to be emotional and thought he attached more importance to manners than he did to actions.

Meridor believed that Begin would not fall asleep before he knew who had been elected to replace him. Like many Begin supporters in the Likud, he preferred the uncharismatic Shamir, in part because he believed that his tenure would serve as a sort of surety until Begin decided to return to the political arena. But he was wrong. Begin had dissociated himself from politics, his life's joy, in one blow. He did not intend to return to public activity, and on the day of the election he was in fact preoccupied with the importation of religious artifacts from Poland to Israel, and he went to bed early. He listened impatiently to Meridor's report on Shamir's victory.¹ The following day, when Shamir