



His last interview...

# The Prime Ministers' Man

The inside story with Yehuda Avner,  
advisor to 5 iconic Israeli Prime Ministers



An intimate of five Israeli prime ministers, Yehuda Avner's behind-the-scenes view of Israel's most crucial historical moments was second to none. In his last interview, which he gave before he passed away this March, he shared his most memorable moments with Zman—including eyewitness accounts of momentous events during the Six Day War and the peace treaty with Egypt. Spanning an incredibly diverse career, Yehuda Avner a"h met US presidents such as Truman, Johnson, Nixon, Ford, Carter and Reagan, as well as British leaders Margaret Thatcher and Queen Elizabeth II. Two things, though, make his story even more unique: He worked equally well with political leaders on the left and right... and did it all as a fully observant Jew....

- Moshe Holender  
- Yitzchok Wagschal





**Y**ehuda Avner watched as men in black ties and their finest suits and ladies clad in elegant gowns were served feasts of roasted pheasant, sizzling roast potatoes and decorative garnished beans. The honored guests were calmly surveyed by the image of President Abraham Lincoln, looking down from his gold-framed portrait above the fireplace in the White House's State Dining Room.

The 20 violinists of the Marine Chamber Orchestra, dressed in their impeccable crimson dress uniforms, concluded their performance. The assembled dignitaries fixed their full attentions on the head table as President Gerald Ford rose to address the banquet. Sitting next to Ford was Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, in whose honor this banquet was held.

After a warm personal welcome to the prime minister and his wife, President Ford launched into a standard speech emphasizing the close friendship and common values between the United States and Israel. This dinner, held in September 1974, marked the end of a productive visit by Rabin, who had been invited by Ford just days after he assumed office in the wake of Richard Nixon's resignation due to the Watergate scandal. With the help of Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, Ford was hoping to complete Nixon's mission of negotiating a lasting peace between Israel and its belligerent Arab neighbors.

The guests dug into their sumptuous meals with gusto. Avner eyed his empty place. As Rabin's advisor on Diaspora affairs and English speechwriter, Avner accompanied the prime minister's every step during his stay in the United States. As a Torah-observant Jew, he was supposed to receive a kosher meal at this banquet. To his slight discomfort, the meal was tarrying. Perhaps it had something to do with his misspelled name card, which read, "Mr. Yeduha Avner."

Seated a few chairs away was the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General George Brown, who was chatting with famous news personality Barbara Walters. Soon, General Brown caught sight of Avner's empty place-setting, and, craning his neck to get a glimpse of his place card, boomed, "Yeduha, not eating with us tonight?"

As if on cue, one of the butlers stepped forward and placed a towering vegetarian plate in front of him. There was a base of lettuce "as thick as a Bible, on top of which sat a mound of diced fruit, on top of that a glob of cottage cheese, and on top of that a swish of whipped cream, so that the whole thingamajig must have stood about



Avner's White House dinner invitation and mis-spelled place card.

a foot high." Those seated near him gasped in admiration. Barbara Walters began to applaud the marvelous work of culinary art. Avner began to redden with embarrassment.

The hubbub attracted the attention of the president, who rose slightly in his chair to ascertain what all the commotion was about. He whispered something into Rabin's ear. Rabin whispered back to him. President Ford then picked up his glass, rose to his full height and, grinning from ear to ear, called out, "Happy birthday young fella! Let's sing a toast to our birthday boy."

At that, the entire company of high-society guests picked up their glasses, rose to their feet and enthusiastically toasted him with a hearty, "Happy birthday, dear Yeduha."

Yehuda Avner flushed and sank further and further into his chair, mortified.

Later, after dinner, he asked Rabin why on earth he had told President Ford that it was his birthday.

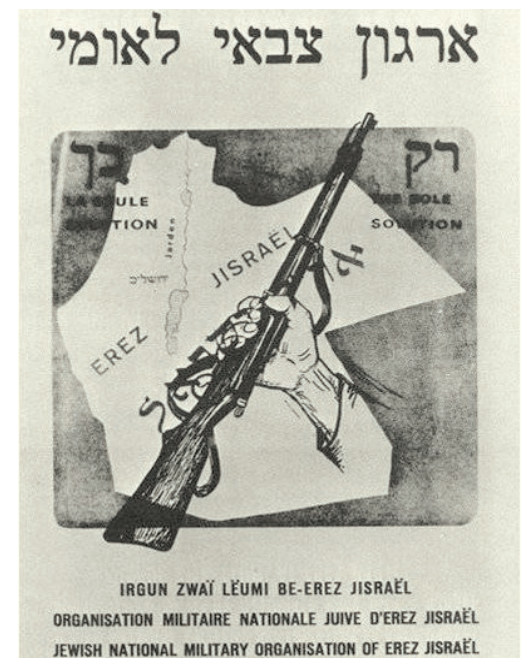
"What else should I have told him—the truth?" he retorted. "If I did that, tomorrow there would be a headline in the newspapers that you ate kosher and I didn't, and the religious parties will bolt the coalition, and I'll have a government crisis on my hands. *Ani meshuga*—am I crazy?"

## Twenty-Seven Years Earlier

A 17-year-old schoolboy from Manchester named Gubby (Yehuda) Haffner met with a chilling sight as he approached his *shul* to *daven shacharis*: blood-red graffiti on the wall reading, "HANG THE JEW TERRORIST BEGIN."

The Irgun revolt against British colonial rule in Palestine was boiling over. The Jewish paramilitary organization attacked British targets and British authorities arrested Irgun members and sentenced them to secret, ignoble executions by hanging. On July 30, 1947, the Irgun responded with retaliatory hangings of two British servicemen.

Pictures of the hanging men were published in British newspapers. There



A propaganda poster for the right-wing Irgun/Etzel militant organization, displaying their motto "*Rak kach*," "Only thus," with a rifle...

was widespread public outcry. Anglo Jewry took pains to distance itself from the Irgun, headed by Menachem Begin, and its tactics.

Throughout England's urban centers, rioting and anti-Jewish violence took hold. Synagogues were damaged and burned. In Liverpool, a mini-Kristallnacht took hold as over 100 windows of Jewish businesses were smashed. Unruly mobs shouted slogans such as "Yids go back to Palestine!" and "Kick the kikes!"

The day after the hangings is when young Yehuda Haffner saw the graffiti on the wall of his synagogue. This, and the violent rioting of the day, only served to reinforce what this young Jewish man—who had come of age in England as the Holocaust raged just across a short stretch of sea—had already decided: Jews, ultimately, had no future except in *Eretz Yisrael*.

The various incidents of anti-Semitism he experienced steeled his resolve to move to *Eretz Yisrael* and help build up the land:

*[In reaction to the Holocaust, I was] besotted to the point of almost mystical*

Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin arrived in Washington DC on Sept. 10, 1974. The state dinner in his honor was held on Sept. 12. Here: Impressive official greeting by the President and First Lady, including herald trumpet greeting, ruffles and flourishes, both national anthems, a 21-gun salute, reviewing of the troops, and welcoming remarks by the President and the Prime Minister's response.

