



Educator's Guide

The Altalena: the Ship That Almost Sank Israel

“Do not shoot back!” With these words, Menachem Begin believed he ensured there would be no civil war. This video delves into a wild episode in Israel’s early history: the 1948 Altalena Affair. As the ship, nicknamed the Altalena (meaning seesaw in Italian and a pseudonym for Ze’ev Jabotinsky, leader of the Revisionist Zionists) approached Israel’s shores during the War of Independence, just five weeks after the country’s founding, bullets started to fly. The unthinkable had happened, as Jews started to shoot at each other and kill one another.

Through this video and educator guide, students will learn about the rivaling Haganah and Irgun and their leaders, their deep conflict and the event that nearly brought Israel to civil war. How was calamity avoided? How did political leaders with such substantial differences manage to hold back their troops for the sake of unity?

Link to video: <https://unpacked.education/video/the-ship-that-almost-sank-israel/>

Further Reading

1. Noam Weissman, “What Can We Learn from the Altalena?” https://jewishjournal.com/cover_story/235375/can-learn-altalena/
2. Shmuel Rosner, “Sinking the Altalena.” https://jewishjournal.com/cover_story/235374/sinking-the-altalena/
3. Joanna Saidel, “Fire in the hole: Blasting the Altalena.” <https://www.timesofisrael.com/fire-in-the-hole-blasting-the-altalena/>
4. Yehuda Avner, *The Prime Ministers*, Chapter 5



Review

- 1.** In one sentence, what was the “Hunting Season”?
- 2.** What was the Altalena ship carrying with it to Israel?
- 3.** Who was the leader of the Haganah?
 - Menachem Begin
 - David Ben-Gurion
 - Yitzhak Rabin
 - Yigal Alon
- 4.** Who was the leader of the Irgun?
 - Menachem Begin
 - David Ben-Gurion
 - Yitzhak Rabin
 - Yigal Alon
- 5.** In what year did the Altalena Affair take place?
 - 1947
 - 1948
 - 1949
 - 1950

Discussion Questions

- 1.** Does the Altalena Affair speak more of extreme division in nascent Israel or unification in avoiding civil war?
- 2.** Menachem Begin fought against the British before there was a state, headed the Irgun, became prime minister, and made a historic peace treaty with Egypt. Yet, Begin considers his behavior and leadership during the Altalena Affair to be his biggest accomplishment. Discuss why you think he saw it that way and whether or not you agree.



3. What was different about the Haganah and Irgun's approach to dealing with the British?

Reflection Questions

1. To many, Begin was the hero of this episode, as he instructed his men not to shoot even when being attacked. There are some who suggest, however, that Ben Gurion was the hero because he made the tough decision to ensure Israel would not have competing militias. Who do you think is the bigger hero in this scenario and why?
2. If there is one way to describe Begin in this tragic episode, it is his ability to engage in self-transcendence. He did not think about his personal desires and beliefs. Rather, he sublimated them for the good of the country. As an individual, when do you drive your decisions not by what is in your personal best interest but rather by what serves the interest of the greater good of our community and nation?
3. The Altalena Affair made it seem like Israel was on the brink of civil war. There were other times in Israel's history, where there was concern for civil war, such as the evacuation of Yamit in 1982 and the evacuation of Jews from Gush Katif in Gaza, in 2005. Yet, civil war has never happened. Why do you think Israelis have consistently avoided civil war despite strong disagreements?