ON THE EVENING of February 28, 1971, Israel’s aging prime minister, Golda Meir, summoned a group of advisers and senior officials to her office for an urgent meeting. Those who filed in included the mayor of Jerusalem, the national police chief, the minister of police, and the minister of justice. Together, they would have to resolve a dilemma: what to do about a new group of troublemakers who were calling themselves the Black Panthers.

The problem started two months earlier with a handful of youths from one of the country’s impoverished neighborhoods. They had no resources or benefactors, and though they claimed to represent Israel’s poor, dark-skinned Jewish masses, there was no way to know whether the masses would rally to their cry. Now, the so-called Panthers were planning to stage their first demonstration, a test of their appeal. Seeing this possibility as a threat, the police commanders were proposing a response—but even they could
tell their plan was heavy-handed. They knew they needed to seek the approval of Israel’s civilian leadership. From the precinct level, the matter went up through the chain of command all the way to the minister of police. He couldn’t come to a decision, either, so he phoned the prime minister. Meanwhile, the press had contributed to the escalation by inflating the seriousness of these activists. Given the explosive reputation of the group’s American namesake, it was an easy story to sensationalize. What started as a police matter was quickly transforming into a threat to Israel’s domestic stability, if only because political leaders perceived it as such.

Meir and her deputies began debating. The first question they faced was whether to allow the protest to take place at all. Under Israeli law, public demonstrations required permits, and the Panthers had dutifully applied for one. From a legal standpoint, the officials could move to reject an application by presenting the case that such a protest would likely result in violence or disorderly conduct. As they began debating, an aide stepped into the room to interrupt. He came to deliver an update on the very issue they were discussing. Hundreds of incendiary flyers signed by the Panthers had just come off the press, and police had arrested two activists for illegally wheat-pasting the flyers on the exterior walls of Jerusalem’s city hall.

The news about the flyers and arrests added to an already hefty surveillance dossier police had compiled on the group. Citing this collection of intel, Israel’s national police commissioner, Pinhas Kopel, recommended that the Panthers’ permit application be denied. Otherwise, he argued, violence and chaos would likely unfold. Kopel enjoyed a reputation as an experienced and capable lawman, and Meir could have accepted his recommendation and moved on. But the reason she had summoned some of her closest advisers was that she recognized the matter was too delicate to determine on narrow or technical grounds. One of her advisers had more reason than the others to be wary of running roughshod over the Panthers and their civil liberties.
Meir’s minister of police, Shlomo Hillel, was an immigrant from Iraq. He was one of only two cabinet officials not of European origin who served as ethnic tokens in the Ashkenazi-dominates government of a country where more than half of the Jewish population was of Middle Eastern, or Mizrahi, descent. At least nominally, then, Hillel and the Panthers shared an identity.

Fourteen years earlier, when he was a junior member of parliament, Hillel became involved in an incident that would foreshadow the current crisis. An informal group of poor Mizrahi newcomers to Israel staged a protest against housing discrimination. They sensed they were being unfairly passed over when apartments became available. The police responded aggressively, dispersing the restive immigrants with force. Outraged by the reports of the crackdown, Hillel compelled a committee of lawmakers to investigate the incident. He knew some of the protestors and considered them fellow patriots who deserved better from the government. “The public must have confidence that the police is run not by hot-headed officers but by people possessing wisdom and a sense of public responsibility,” he said at the time in a speech to parliament. To heed the advice of his younger self, he would need somehow to guide the situation toward a conciliatory outcome.

The rest of Israel’s seasoned statesmen—and the bureaucracies they controlled—should have been prepared to handle unrest and contain Mizrahi disaffection. They had practiced when protests broke out at the immigrant camps in the 1950s amid an influx of hundreds of thousands of Jews. This decade of turbulence culminated in 1959 with an eruption that became known as the Wadi Salib Uprising. The rumored police killing of an unarmed Mizrahi resident in the city of Haifa triggered mass outrage and led to a period of dramatic confrontations between police officers and protestors. The memory of those clashes was worrying officials now as they debated what to do with the Panthers. “[The Black Panthers] could ignite ethnic tensions, possibly
producing a rerun of Wadi Salib,” the prime minister and her advisers realized, according to a police memo summarizing the discussion.

What the housing protesters, the Wadi Salib rioters, and, now, the Panthers shared was an existence outside of respectable society. These rebellions originated in distressed communities that lagged behind in a country that was rapidly Westernizing and industrializing. Their grievances were repeatedly dismissed because the protesters were on the margins. The Israeli government considered the people calling themselves Panthers to be “social rejects,” as a police memo put it, reflecting long-standing attitudes toward Israeli’s Mizrahi poor.

In other ways, however, the government was facing a new type of adversary. The Black Panthers were not communists with fealty to political parties or ideologies like those of some past protest leaders. Nor were they angry immigrant fathers and mothers who perhaps could be counted on to settle quickly in exchange for relative stability and marginally better conditions. The new menace emerged from what were being called “street corner gangs.” Any urban dweller in Israel would have recognized them. Not mere delinquents, but rather bands of teenage boys and young men with flagrant disregard for social norms. The alienation that manifested itself in their separate style of dress, speech, and manners had never before translated into a political identity—until a street gang from the Jerusalem neighborhood of Musrara suddenly proclaimed its ambition to become Black Panthers.

To make matters worse, the Panthers were not acting entirely alone. The politicians were told that dangerous leftist provocateurs, from a group known as Matzpen, were attempting to hijack the nascent Panther movement. Matzpen was a Marxist organization with a few dozen members, and in keeping with the fashion of the far left, the tiny group had recently split into three factions. Their fringe views included hard-line anti-capitalism and, more alarmingly for Israeli officials, a rejection of Zionism. After 1967, Matzpen was almost alone among Israelis in daring to speak out against the country’s rule over conquered Arab
territories. Yet, unlike the Panthers, Matzpen was not made up of society’s rejects. Its activists all came from “good families,” as one Israeli newspaper put it at the time, using a code that usually meant people of Ashkenazi descent with strong family ties to Zionist centers of power. Because they came from the establishment and disavowed it, their existence constituted a national shame. It didn’t matter that they had no actual political clout.

One of the Panthers or someone close to them was feeding the police information concerning Matzpen’s meddling. The intel was specific: Matzpen was holding “indoctrination” sessions for the Panthers about the necessity for violence, telling them that militancy was the hallmark of the American Black Panthers whom they hoped to emulate. There was even, reportedly, a plan in the works to have the Panthers wield nail-studded clubs against police. With such detailed intel, Kopel could feel confident in his case against allowing a demonstration to happen.

On the other hand, as the politicians realized, a rejection of the permit could backfire. The Israeli government had usually refrained from prohibiting demonstrations, at least those staged by its Jewish citizens. They recognized that protests served as a pressure valve for the disaffected and the aggrieved. The wider public, anyway, often responded to demonstrations with apathy. Denying the permit now would set a precedent and generate much-wanted publicity for both the Panthers and Matzpen. The officials also agreed that “it is very likely the protest would take place despite the prohibition out of a desire to clash with police.”

Withholding a permit was not the only tool at their disposal. The discussion turned to what “positive measures” the police and city hall could take to placate the Panthers. Perhaps the military could be persuaded to accept some of them as recruits. If not military service, then authorities could help with job placements. Jerusalem mayor Teddy Kollek took it upon himself to work his connections with the media. His job would be to emphasize Matzpen’s involvement and tell reporters that the Panthers were just “social rejects” who are undeserving of attention.
There were less than three days to go until the planned protest, and the permit application was pending. The officials were determined not to let the matter drag on. Within an hour, which is how long the meeting at Meir’s office lasted, they would make their decision. If the officials were to approve the permit, they risked emboldening elements of society they considered to be illegitimate. Such a move would also alienate the police force, especially in light of intel assessments forecasting violence against officers. Denying the permit carried its own drawbacks, chiefly that doing so would resolve the matter only from a bureaucratic standpoint. The Panthers could defy authorities and hold a demonstration anyway—and that could end up being the worst of all scenarios. A decision to deny the permit would therefore also require some form of enforcement, which carried its own risks. Whatever choice they would make, the goal of the government was the same: to contain the threat of social turmoil.
Robert Reuven Abergel was five years old when his parents decided it was time to move out of the Jewish quarter of Rabat, Morocco, and leave behind a country that countless generations of the family had called home. The year was 1948 and, in the faraway Holy Land, war had broken out. When the fighting was over, the entity known as the British Mandate for Palestine became a partitioned territory: on one side, the State of Israel, and on the other, the West Bank, ruled by the Hashemite Kingdom of Transjordan. The Abergel family knew little about the war or about the Zionist militias that fought to establish Jewish sovereignty over the land. Nor were they much informed about the wider ideological movement that was desperately lobbying international governments to recognize the creation of a Jewish state. But David and Esther Abergel had read their scripture and recited their prayers and they longed for an imagined
Jerusalem where Jewish brotherhood prevailed and material abundance was divinely ordained.

For the time being, the Abergels were in the minority among the hundreds of thousands of Jews in Morocco. The overwhelming majority preferred to stay put; there was a price to be paid for being the first to leave. The Abergel family with seven children, and still adding more, became wards of the Jewish Agency, the international organization arranging to bring Jews to the Land of Israel. The journey across the Mediterranean from Morocco to Israel would take the family two years. First, they traveled across the desert sands of North Africa for hundreds of miles to reach French-ruled Algiers. From there, a ship carried them to the shores of France where they moved into a decommissioned World War II camp. The family persevered even as their savings were siphoned away and their lives settled into the drudgery of collecting rations, negotiating for petty privileges, and obeying directives handed down by camp bureaucrats. Every day they waited to be cleared for passage to Israel. The excuses for the delay varied but usually centered on the medical condition of the children. In the crowded and unsanitary conditions of the camp, the migrants struggled to maintain their health. The elderly were rejected outright under a policy of screening immigrants for the fittest among them. The new state wanted only bodies capable of settling frontiers and fighting wars.

Meanwhile, in Tel Aviv, debates were raging within the nascent government and on the pages of newspapers about whether absorbing Moroccan Jews was worth the trouble. Haaretz journalist Aryeh Gleblum, for example, published a series of reports attempting to characterize people like the Abergels. “Among the Africans living in the camps, you will find filth, card games played for money, drinking for the sake of getting intoxicated, and prostitution,” Gleblum wrote in the newspaper. “Anyone possessing any degree of responsibility must not be embarrassed or afraid to confront the problem head-on. Have we considered what would happen to this country if this were its
population?” Only a handful of years after World War II, a newspaper in Israel was using the type of language that preceded the atrocities of the Holocaust—against fellow Jews.

If his parents understood little about the abuse they were suffering at the hands of people speaking in the name of Judaism, Abergel was only a child and knew nothing about it. Those early years of his life were a blur of fenced enclosures, sleeping in tents, and playing on the muddy ground outside with the children of other Moroccan families, all stubbornly hopeful about starting their lives over in Israel. When Abergel was seven years old, his family was finally cleared for immigration.

The ship that would transport the family to Israel docked in the French port of Marseilles in May 1950. It was called the *Negba*, a name that hinted at the eventual fate of many of its migrant passengers. In the Zionist imagination, the Negev Desert, which gives the vessel its name, was an empty desolation begging for intervention by the muscular Jewish state. David Ben-Gurion, the country’s founding father and its first prime minister, famously envisioned that the desert would blossom if it were settled by Jews—the indigenous Bedouin population was seen as background noise or perhaps an impediment. Unsurprisingly, not many Israelis found the prospect of making their home in desolate reaches of the desert attractive. The group of people left to carry out the back-breaking labor of planting trees and building towns and roads in the dry sands were the masses of Jews from North Africa.

The *Negba* had been purchased a few years earlier from the Netherlands, and equipped with a ceremonial Torah book gifted by Amsterdam’s wealthy Jewish community, to form part of Israel’s small merchant marine. Sea access was critical because it was the country’s only connection to the rest of the world. All the inland borders faced enemy countries: Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, and Egypt. Immigrants, tourists, and goods were delivered by the *Negba* to Israel weekly as it shuttled between Marseilles and Haifa. On the return journey, the ship carried government emissaries, commercial cargo, and,
increasingly, Moroccan Jews who were horrified at conditions in Israel and had decided to go back. By 1951, 6,714 Jewish immigrants from North Africa and the Middle East had left Israel, with many returning to their native countries.

Embedding reporters among the passengers of the Negba offered a surefire way for the Tel Aviv press to generate attention-grabbing stories, such as when a band of communists took over the ship, removed the Israeli flag, and hoisted a red one in its stead. On another occasion, four veterans of the Spanish Civil War, on the Republican side, snuck aboard the Negba in Marseilles, hoping to arrive in Haifa and join the Israeli ranks fighting the Arab armies. And in 1949, a journalist decided to investigate the phenomenon of the Moroccan Jews leaving Israel and signed up for the Negba’s voyage to France. He reported that he attempted to talk the emigrants into changing their minds. Failing to do so, he concluded that they belonged to “an ethnic group of complainers and whiners. They gripe against Israel and do not distinguish between a nonsensical objection and a rational complaint.”

On May 10, 1950, the Negba, with the Abergels on board, departed Marseilles on a five-day journey. The family spent the time confined to the lower decks; tourists and notables were up top. On the fifth day, the white steamship finally arrived within sight of the wooded hills of Haifa Bay. As the passengers spotted land, they broke out in song. For Abergel, it was a relief to know that his seasickness would soon be over. His mother gathered him and her other children and announced, It’s time to get dressed. She opened a suitcase and pulled out their finest outfits, the ones usually reserved for Shabbat. She washed the children as best she could and had them change. We must look our best when we greet Eretz Yisrael, she said.

When the bridge was lowered onto the pier, prominent members of the Israeli Bar Association were assembled at the port. They had come to receive the bodies of Russian Zionist lawyer Oscar Gruzenberg and his wife for burial. For the Abergels and the other migrants, Israel