

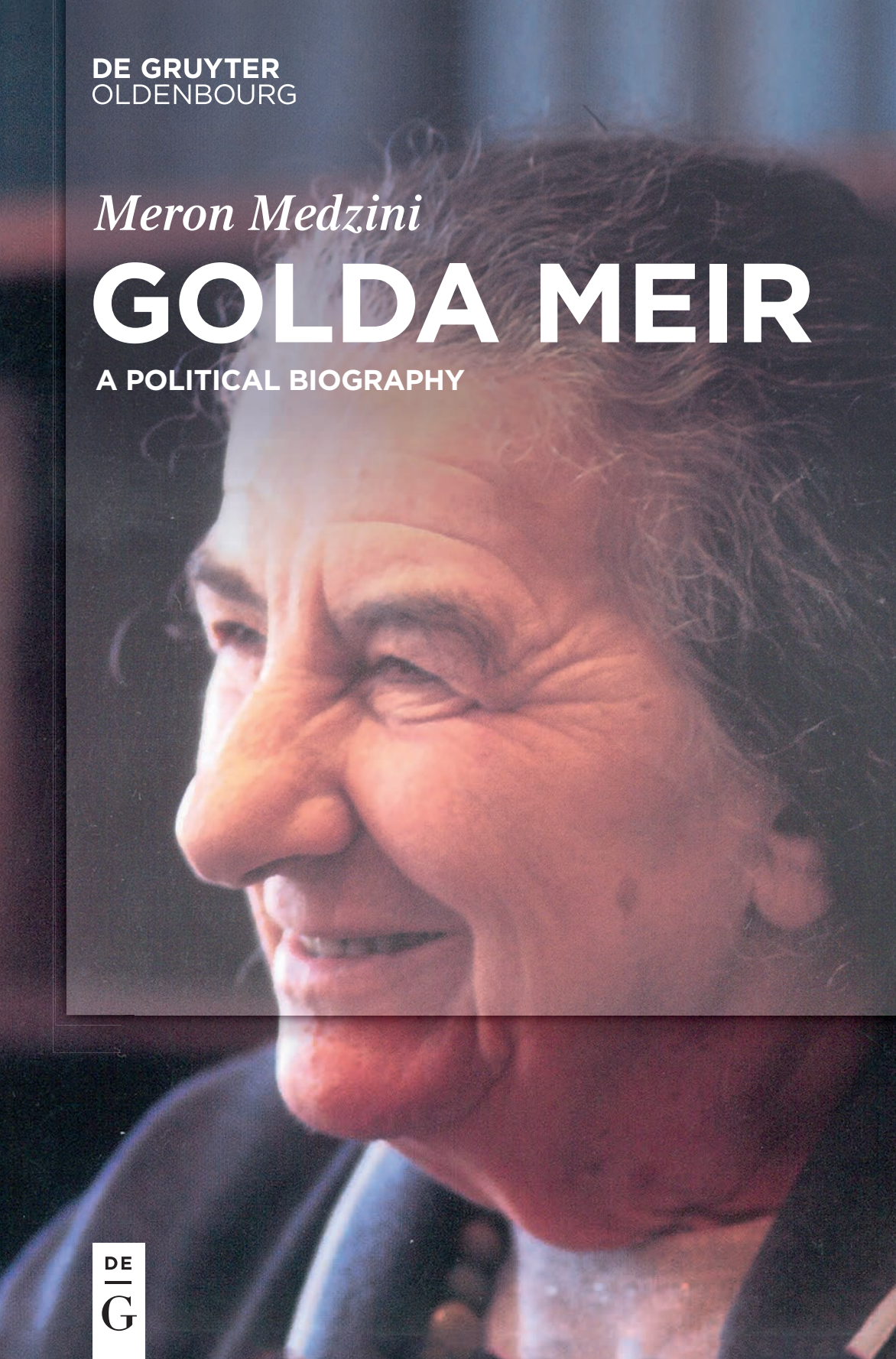
DE GRUYTER  
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*Meron Medzini*

# GOLDA MEIR

A POLITICAL BIOGRAPHY

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Meron Medzini  
**Golda Meir**



Meron Medzini

# Golda Meir



A Political Biography

**DE GRUYTER**  
OLDENBOURG



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This book is based on the Hebrew original:

Meron Medzini

Golda: Biyografyah Poliṭit

Tel-Aviv: Yediot Aḥaronot: Sifrei Hemed, © 2008

ISBN 978-3-11-048734-3

e-ISBN (PDF) 978-3-11-049250-7

e-ISBN (EPUB) 978-3-11-048979-8



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#### **Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

A CIP catalog record for this book has been applied for at the Library of Congress.

#### **Bibliographic information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek**

The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data are available on the Internet at <http://dnb.dnb.de>.

© 2008 Yediot Aḥaronot: Sifre Hemed, published by De Gruyter Oldenbourg

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Cover Image: Golda Meir, © Yedioth Ahronoth Books and Chemed Books

Typesetting: Konvertus

Printing and binding: CPI books GmbH, Leck

☺ Printed on acid-free paper

Printed in Germany

[www.degruyter.com](http://www.degruyter.com)

## Preface to the English edition

This book originally appeared in Hebrew in 1990 under the name *The Proud Jewess—Golda Meir and the Vision of Israel*. Published twelve years after her death, it was based on sources that were available until the late 1980's. In those days many controversial and delicate items were still subject to censorship. Israel's population at the time numbered some five million souls. It was clear that there was a lack of a broad historic perspective to evaluate properly the life and work of Golda Meir as a major figure that was the product of the Jewish community in Palestine during the Mandatory era and later the State of Israel. The first Hebrew version was an attempt to portray the character of this amazing personality that at the time seemed to have been forgotten in Israel, although less abroad where she remained as a much better known figure.

Thirty years after her death and some twenty years after the appearance of the first version of this biography, my publisher thought the time had come to update the original biography with newly published and opened sources that were unavailable earlier. Many diplomatic and military documents that were hidden in archives in various countries were now opened. Israel's population had grown to seven million, among them a million Russian Jews who immigrated to Israel from the former Soviet Union in the last decade of the twentieth century. Many of them showed much interest in this woman who lit the torch that led to the opening of the gates and to their immigration to Israel. Many of the younger generation that grew up in Israel since Golda died in 1978 wondered about her role in the recent history of the country, and specifically her responsibility for and her role during the Yom Kippur War, and asked whether what they heard of her was the full and final historic judgment. The second Hebrew version attempted to confront this major chapter in her life.

The younger generation that has grown up in Israel in the almost forty years after her death experienced leaders of another type, maybe some whose "ratings" were higher than hers, in their much better command of Hebrew, in their political and military experience. But it is not hard to argue that apart from Menachem Begin, Yitzhak Rabin in his second term as prime minister and Ariel Sharon, none of her other successors surpassed her in leadership capability, in understanding of the international and regional realities and mainly in her honesty and integrity, her adherence to her principles and values, her stubbornness and her patience in sticking to her truth. In certain ways she reminds Israelis of another prime minister who in recent years is being more fully appreciated—Yitzhak Shamir (1915–2011). Perhaps Begin and Rabin had a greater vision than she, but this never detracted from her ability to lead Israel during five critical years in its history and to serve as the supreme commander during the Yom Kippur War.

Regrettably, many young Israelis display much ignorance regarding their past leaders. Ben-Gurion is an airport, Begin is a major highway in Jerusalem, there are Eshkol streets and neighborhoods in various places in Israel, a theater and opera performing center in Tel Aviv and a highway in Jerusalem are named after Golda. Their faces adorn Israel's currency. When the first edition of the Hebrew version of this book was published it was intended to my four children and their generation. The second Hebrew edition was intended for them and my eight grandchildren so they should know who was Golda Meir, what she did and what was her place in their history of their land.

The English version will hopefully be read by two additional grandchildren in Israel and by their generation overseas. By now Israel's population is over eight million people. Regrettably, some of Golda's successors as prime ministers of Israel have been the subject of police investigations, one of them even went to prison in 2016 for corruption charges. This led many Israelis to wonder about the character of those who preceded the native-born Israeli prime ministers who happily were never interrogated by the Israeli police. This led to a growing interest in the founding fathers and one mother of Israel, both in Israel and overseas. Testimony to this claim lies in the growing number of biographies written in recent years in Israel and overseas on Ben-Gurion, Sharett, Eshkol, Rabin, Peres, Shamir, Barak, Sharon and even Netanyahu. One major biography was written on Golda in Hebrew and five in English, two even in French. This English version contains a great deal of new material from sources that appeared in the past twenty years as a result of the opening up of archives in Jerusalem, Washington, London, Paris and even Moscow.

It can be safely claimed that many of the earlier assessments of Golda that appeared in Israel were mostly negative. Now it can be argued that there is a new evaluation based on newly opened archives. It demonstrates that she wanted peace and did much to attain it, but she was always somber in her assessments. Even after the signing of the Israel-Egypt peace treaty in 1979, the Israel-Jordan peace treaty in 1994 and the Oslo Process that began in 1993, the recognition of the Palestine Liberation Organization and the acceptance of the two-states principle, there are a lot of doubts if these historic events will be those that will bring about a total peace between Israel and its neighbors. It is difficult to argue with what Golda had written in her memoirs "My Life" in 1975: that the Arab and Moslem world has not yet accepted the idea of the existence of a Jewish, Zionist, independent, sovereign state in the heart of the Middle East. Perhaps this will take many more years and Israel must be prepared for every eventuality. She also said: "I believe we shall have peace with our neighbors, but I am certain that no one will make peace with a weak Israel, if Israel will not be strong, there will be no peace". She then added: "We shall be able to live here only if we will be ready

to fight. Our neighbors will not be that charitable to grant us peace". These words seem to be valid in 2017.

I am grateful to many who assisted in the funding for the preparation and research that went into this book. Among them are the Leonard Davis Institute of International Relations of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, the Memorial Foundation for Jewish Culture in New York, the Golda Meir Association headed then by Yehudit Ronen-Reifen. I am also grateful for the assistance given by the Israel Government Archives in Jerusalem, the Central Zionist Archives in Jerusalem, the Pinchas Lavon Labor Movement Archives in Tel Aviv and the National Archives of the United States. I am also grateful to Julia Brauch, Monika Pflughar and their teams at De Gruyter for initiating this project and seeing it to its completion, and to Cordula Hubert for her meticulous editing of the English text.

For the sake of full and proper disclosure, I knew Golda Meir since my early childhood and had the privilege of serving in the Office of the Prime Minister during the years Golda served in that capacity as Director of the Israel Government Press Office in Jerusalem and for a time as Spokesman of the Prime Minister's Bureau (1973–1974). My late mother Regina Hamburger-Medzini was probably Golda's closest friend from the time they met in the second grade of Public School 4 in Milwaukee, Wisconsin in 1906 until Golda's death seventy-two years later. She was also in the small group that immigrated to Israel in 1921. My mother was an important source for the early years. Over the years I have spoken with scores of people, who knew and worked with Golda in her various capacities. Some were members of her family, close friends and colleagues. Most of them preferred to remain anonymous and I respect their wish. All of them shared with me their recollections, directed me to sources and enlightened me with their evaluations. I must also thank hundreds of my students at the Rothberg International School of the Hebrew University where I have been teaching a course on Israel's foreign relations in the past forty-five years. They helped me to better understand many events and processes. My family bore with much patience the burden involved in the preparation of two Hebrew and one English versions. Responsibility for the final product rests of course with me.

Meron Medzini  
Jerusalem 2017





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# Prologue

An old woman attired in a black suit sat in the fourth row of a small dilapidated theater in the heart of Tel Aviv. She was surrounded by hundreds of well-wishing comrades and admirers and could feel the waves of love and esteem flowing from them and almost enveloping her. Her face was creased with lines, her hair, carefully made up in a bun over her large head and prominent nose, was streaked with silver threads. As always, she wore no make-up. Even as she sat in her chair, the weight of her age was evident. To many present on that occasion, she looked tired and drawn. Others felt she looked radiant, full of vitality and life.

To the entire gathering, members of the Israel Labor Party Central Committee, assembled to elect the party's candidate for the office of prime minister, vacant after the premature death of Prime Minister Levi Eshkol, she was the last hope. Without her, many feared the chances of the Israel Labor Party winning the forthcoming national elections, due to be held in the fall of 1969, were slim. To remain in power and to avoid a vicious war of succession were the two main reasons for bringing back the aged and retired leader and placing on her frail shoulders the burden of Israel's highest office.

At 71, officially in semi-retirement for the past year, Golda Meir could not refuse the call. Tonight, on March 7, 1969, she was being formally elected not only as the Labor Party's candidate for the office of prime minister, but also as the party's undisputed leader, both positions vacated two weeks earlier by the death of Levi Eshkol. There was excitement in the air in the shabby theater—people were looking at Golda with love, bordering on adoration. After all, she was not a new political entity. In terms of length of service, she was the most senior of all. From pure political considerations, she was the ideal solution. Without her, it was argued, the field would be open for an all-out struggle for the leadership between the two younger contenders—Yigal Allon and Moshe Dayan, both of whom the party elders did not fully trust, and never felt at home with, certainly not with Dayan. Golda would unite the party; she would act as caretaker prime minister until the coming elections, and “and then we shall see what happens”.

Few doubted that she would reject the party's call. For decades she called herself a “Child of the Party”, and the command of the party was never to be refused, its collective wisdom never to be disputed or questioned. The party was literally her second home since her arrival in Israel half a century earlier. The party created her and made her famous and in turn was graced by her leadership and rewarded by five decades of loyal and devoted service.

To most Israelis, the events of that evening came as a great surprise. Some felt the party was doing something cruel to Golda, unearthing her from a well-deserved retirement and hoisting her up to the top of the “greasy pole”, to borrow

a phrase made famous by Benjamin Disraeli a century earlier. But, unknown to most Israelis and Jews abroad, Golda had been in the running for the office of prime minister since 1953, when David Ben-Gurion retired temporarily from active politics and went to the Negev desert to reflect on the fate of the State of Israel, whose independence he had proclaimed in May 1948. Then the job went to Moshe Sharett. When Ben-Gurion retired as prime minister for the final time in June 1963, Golda refused to consider the possibility of succeeding him and was delighted that the mantle fell instead to Levi Eshkol. But since the summer of 1967, when rumors about the rapidly declining health of Eshkol began to abound in the inner circles of the party, she was approached to consider the possibility of succeeding him, an idea she did not turn down. And now, barely ten days after Eshkol's death, and heavily pressured by the party, she finally relented and accepted.

She knew well the meaning of the burden of the office, having served in the cabinet from 1949 to 1966. She understood the special circumstances of Israel, then in the midst of a prolonged and costly war of attrition against Egypt along the Suez Canal. She realized fully well that despite its smashing victory in the Six Days War, Israel was as far from peace as it had ever been, and perhaps farther. She knew that by assuming the position of prime minister, she would again lose her privacy and would once more be in the center stage both in Israel and abroad. She also understood the cruelty and viciousness of Israeli politics—she had been in the thick of this tough arena for over fifty years.

The discussion on her candidacy lasted three hours. It became evident that no one truly objected to the idea and most of the speakers could not find the right superlatives in order to praise her. Even the opponents, mainly the Rafi faction leaders, preferred not to raise unnecessary objections—why quarrel with the candidate who will head the party and government? At last, a veteran Mapai leader, Akiva Govrin, proposed her nomination, and in the best Labor Party tradition, she was the only candidate. The vote, too, in the usual style, was almost unanimous. There were few abstentions while an overwhelming majority endorsed her candidacy. When the results were announced, the entire assembly burst into wild applause and Golda, this time visibly moved, covered her face with both hands and burst into tears.

Golda cried because she knew she would have to make decisions affecting the life and death of young men—soldiers of the Israel Defense Force (IDF), and she thought not only of the men but of their mothers and fathers as well. She knew she was going to lead a country that on the face of it was still basking under the sun of the stunning triumph of the Six Day War, but was already torn apart by the results of that victory, encumbered with territories inhabited by over a million Palestinian Arabs who detested Israel, Zionism and the Jews. She knew that Israel was also torn from within by a relentless conflict between orthodox

and secular Jews; tensions between Sephardi Jews who had arrived in Israel from North Africa and Arab countries in the early years of statehood, and the more established Ashkenazim who came from Europe and North America. She knew there was tension between Israeli Jews and Israeli Arabs, the latter then comprising some 16% of the population. There was a growing gap in the standards of living of the veteran, well-to-do Israelis living in the more affluent sections of the cities and the kibbutzim, and the less fortunate, clustered in urban slums and development towns in the periphery. There was increasing bitterness among a growing number of mainly older Israelis who felt that the country's new ideals, those of a consumer-industrial-technological society, were alien to the classical Zionist spirit and vision of days gone by. Some demanded the return to the pure idealism of the founding fathers. She, too, was stunned by the rampant consumerism that became one of the symbols of the new Israeli society.

But above all, she knew she was taking over a thankless job and would be blamed for all the faults of the government, party and nation. There would be no one else to blame but her. In any case, this was not her character. She always assumed responsibility for her actions, for better or worse.

She may have been bothered by another, more terrible secret which no more than twenty people in the entire country shared with her. In 1965, her doctors had diagnosed her with cancer of the lymph glands. Happily, its spread was arrested without surgery, but cancer became a major factor she would have to live with. How would she function under pain, under medication? Would her illness affect her judgment, mind and body, she often wondered. Although her doctors gave her a clean bill of health and advised her that she would be able to stand the strain of the new job, should she tell the party and nation how ill she could become? Could she divulge the nature of her disease? What would happen to the party? What would happen to the country? For her, the two were virtually synonymous.

But tonight was her great moment. She rose from her seat, made her way slowly and carefully to the podium and stood there for long minutes, her head bent, without uttering a word. Then she began to speak, without notes, without a prepared text. Her voice shook, but it soon became steady as it rose. She spoke of the terrible responsibility that would now be hers', she called for unity and support for her government. As she left the hall in the midst of general jubilation, the party elders heaved a sigh of relief: they had successfully averted another crisis, the last thing they needed. Golda felt she could still tender service to the party, the nation and the Jewish people, and was prepared to give her utmost to them, which she did.

Five years later, on a cold, windy and rainy day in March 1974, Golda Meir stood on Mount Herzl in Jerusalem, Israel's central military cemetery, the country's Arlington National Cemetery, attending the annual memorial ceremony for

fallen soldiers whose places of burial were unknown. She was flanked by Defense Minister Moshe Dayan and Chief of Staff David Elazar. It was four months after the terrible Yom Kippur War whose scars were very fresh. Israel was still reeling from the trauma of the surprise attack by the Syrian and Egyptian armies, the horrible losses and shattered self-image. Public support for Golda and her government sunk to its lowest point. Hundreds of mourners gathered. As the rain fell, the military chaplain intoned the Kaddish, the prayer for the dead. Around her were rows and rows of fresh graves—the testimony of the most recent and brutal war. Shouts were heard from the crowds—“murderers”, “assassins”. Golda did not move a muscle, although to close observers it appeared that with every shout she winced and was deeply hurt. Dayan stood frozen. Security men closed in, ready to protect them, but the crowd did not move. The rain fell and Golda was sheltered by a woman soldier holding a big black umbrella over her shriveled body. The umbrella’s color fit the somber mood of the occasion. She lowered her head, as though unable to look at the eyes of the bereaved families. For the first time in her fifty years of public life, she lowered her eyes. She could not look at the faces of the bereaved families. Golda, who was always in need of love, affection and admiration, was now cruelly rejected. The cries seemed to have pierced her like daggers. Once the idol of the public, she was now a shattered old woman. She barely made her way back to her car, walking as though in a trance. When she returned to her office, her face was ashen. A month later she resigned. “I have come to the end of the road,” she said. For the first time in her life she shied away from a challenge. Broken in body and spirit, she became a victim of the war. All through the years, she was imbued with the sense that it was her prime responsibility to provide the Israeli nation with peace and security. Instead, she realized that she had brought on a war and a national trauma which could neither be healed nor easily erased.

Judgment of Golda cannot end here. There was far more to her than politics. She was an extraordinary woman, a great and fascinating leader. Although on the outside she seemed to be a simple woman, in reality she had a very complicated personality. She was modest and occasionally self-effacing, yet at times could be haughty, imperious and domineering. Normally she scorned expressions of esteem and adoration towards her, but in reality she craved public affection and love, sentiments that she showered on her family and on close associates. Golda could also hate and bear malice to her enemies, and there were many. She was magnanimous, but at times petty. She symbolized the best qualities of the Jewish people, but occasionally displayed some of their worst. She was open-minded and she was biased, she was inquisitive, yet also closed to new ideas which did not fit her past experience or her views. Initially a revolutionary, she became an arch conservative as she grew old. She was the object of great deal of irrational admiration, but also of much sneering and on occasion ridicule. Loving and warmhearted, she could

on occasion be infuriating to her enemies. The outside world saw her as the nice, gentle, pleasant and fragile Jewish grandmother. But at the same time she was a ruthless political animal, possessing an iron will and self-discipline. She was at once courageous, baffling, exasperating, willful, excitable, calm and serene, mild and stubborn. She detested criticism and refused to acknowledge errors.

Golda was a woman of enormous contradictions. She exuded a tremendous inner strength, a serene, rock-like appearance, without histrionics or resorting to melodramatics; she never had any doubts about her cause or how to achieve it. But she was also tormented all her life by a sense of inadequacy, of not being up to the job she held at the time, of lacking adequate education and experience, of an intellectual inferiority. She could exude an aura of power and authority, yet in private she was often beset by self-doubts and melancholy. She was a very strong and brave woman, who bore her many physical afflictions with great patience and fortitude. Yet she also displayed many signs of weakness. She would occasionally burst into tears, and not always for the theatrical impact. She was very vulnerable and easily hurt by disparaging words from persons she particularly admired or appreciated, with David Ben-Gurion at the top of the list.

She was not a versatile woman and did not possess an original or a creative mind. But she made up for that by being true to her convictions and causes, defending them relentlessly. She was noted for espousing and explaining her causes repeatedly at home and abroad, as though believing that the more she repeated her ideas, the more they would sink in. She preferred to operate on the basis of her feelings and intuition rather than examine every issue strictly by its logical content. Intuition is normally the enemy of cold judgment. She was an impulsive woman, but on occasion she was very calculated and shrewd, clever and at times sophisticated.

Being a woman of very strong convictions in the righteousness of her cause, she refused to change her views and her political beliefs, even when faced with new public moods or a changing political reality. Yet she was clever enough to realize that at times compromises had to be made, choices determined and decisions taken which would involve concessions. She was known for her tenacity, clinging to her ideology, but in the end of her career, she failed to appreciate that she was the prime minister of an Israel that was new and different from the one that she had dreamed of. She could barely come to terms with new ideas and new realities as she clung desperately, and at times even pathetically, to the old values of the founding fathers of Israel.

Her strength was also her weakness. By clinging to her views, she became inflexible, rigid and stubborn. While ostensibly proud of those traits, she could not always sense when the time had come for readjustment to be made; when to adapt to new situations and new leaders.



She was generous and gentle, devoted and loyal to her family and close friends, not sparing herself or her waning strength, both physical and emotional. But she could be biting, sarcastic, cynical and icy. Usually she spoke from the heart to the heart of her audience, and turned more to their emotions than to their reason or logic. But she could also be a consummate actress whose gestures, words and inflection were calculated and sometimes even rehearsed.

Her vocabulary was very limited. Her best ideas were expressed in Yiddish, the language she grew up on, which she spoke from the heart. English came next, but she never overcame its intricate structure and her critics said it was limited to a “several hundred basic words”. She never claimed differently, but with this limited vocabulary she often did wonders. Hebrew was a poor third, a language in which she struggled unsuccessfully to express herself. One day she heard that a close colleague, Abba Eban, sneeringly asked why she used only two hundred words when her vocabulary consisted of five hundred words that she knew in Hebrew. She stopped greeting him. Hurt, he asked the reason for her behavior to which she replied: “With such a limited vocabulary, why should I waste precious words on you”.

She recognized her lack of formal education in comparison to her peers and mentors. She always referred to her wisdom as “primitive wisdom”. When she was about to unleash criticism, she would start off by saying: “Could someone please enlighten my primitive wisdom”. She knew that the absence of formal higher education (apart from two years of Teachers Training College in Milwaukee) was a liability, but it could be overcome by greater conviction and stronger belief in her cause. She disliked intellectuals per se, but admired those who belonged to the generation of the founding fathers of the Labor Movement and the State of Israel.

She was a poor orator, but a wonderful speaker, a highly effective conversationalist but when reading from a prepared text, she did poorly. Then she often sounded wooden and hollow. She rarely prepared her speeches, did not make notes and knew in advance what she was going to say. But as both foreign minister and later prime minister, she had her speeches written by others and she read them in a monotonous manner, occasionally giving the impression that she did not really mean what she said. She could be brief but could also go on at length.

At the time when the founding fathers would orate for four and five hours, she was known for her brevity. In 1933 she visited her daughter in a summer camp and was asked to speak. Her daughter Sarah asked her how long she intended to speak. When Golda said: “half an hour”; Sarah responded: “If you have nothing to say you should not speak”.

She loved music, mainly classical music and the theater. Movies were also a major form of entertainment. Reading books was never her great hobby in her last years. She rarely quoted from classical masterpieces and was never at home with

the great nineteenth-century Russian, European and even American authors. She was not known to have read modern Israeli literature, but made a point of regularly meeting Israeli writers. She was far more at home with newspapers, and later radio and television were her constant companions. She was a woman endowed with enormous patience and forbearance, but could not stand fools near her, although she treated them politely. Unfortunately, fools were many and her time precious. She often had to make a supreme effort not to appear abrupt and impatient to those she considered fools.

One of her glaring traits was a sense of pessimism—she tended to see the darker side of things rather than the brighter side. She made up for this by being a strong believer in her ideology. She believed fervently in democracy and in the best tradition of democratic socialism, yet at heart she was an authoritarian who did not trust the instincts of the masses and did not think they could properly judge what was best for them.

Like many of her peers, she had “Bolshevik” characteristics. The party and the Labor Movement were synonymous with the country. What was good for the party was good for the country, and vice versa. She was a child of the party; it became her second home, making up for the private one she lacked. She strongly believed that the party could do no wrong as long as it followed the writs of its leaders. She was one of the founders and pillars of the leading labor party Mapai, yet ironically and unwittingly, she did her share to hasten the downfall of her party in the 1960’s and 1970’s. She lived to see her party triumph as well as to see it go down in a crushing defeat in May 1977, from which it never recovered. She may have sensed deep in her heart that her own policies may have contributed much to the party downfall.

She was a Socialist by deep conviction, but was at her best with the richest Jewish capitalists in the Diaspora from whom she raised huge sums of money for Israel. As prime minister she had many problems communicating with Israel’s working class, while she found common language with the new wealthy class in Israel, created partly by Labor Party policies. She was never a noted economics thinker, but that did not prevent her from being one of the heads of the Federeation of Trade Unions (the Histadrut) and later a successful Minister of Labor and Housing.

Golda left the United States at an early age to make a new home and new life for herself in then Palestine, but nonetheless she retained a soft spot for America and would often go back to that country which gave her the first taste of freedom and opportunity. Yet she was never an “American” in the common sense of the term, perhaps because she may have realized the opportunities offered to a young Jewish girl in the early 1920’s were very limited. She felt that Palestine offered much more towards her personal fulfillment and development and later

an impressive advancement of her career. But in reality she remained a product of the Eastern European Jewish ghetto with a significant American experience. She began her political career in the 1920's by being very much in tune with the times and the needs of the working class. However, as times went by, she became increasingly alienated from the needs of the majority of the Israeli people, chiefly those who came from North Africa and Arab countries—the so-called Sephardi Jews. They would avenge the years of neglect and slight by ousting the Labor Party from power in May 1977.

Golda Meir was never obsessed with accumulating political power or personal wealth and did not strive to gain total control over institutions or people. Throughout her life, Golda was never preoccupied with status, authority and honors. She pursued not so much power but recognition. She possessed a very strong need to achieve, to demonstrate to herself and to those close to her that she could do any job entrusted to her. Part of her tragedy was that when she reached the pinnacle of power, she failed to provide a role model and moral inspiration to those who considered her as their leader. She may have felt that since she commanded such compelling causes as the rebuilding of the Jewish state and nation, and since she wielded enormous influence on Diaspora Jewry, it would somehow spill over into Israel. On rare occasions did she succeed in elevating, inspiring and exalting the people of Israel. Her style was never that of the dynamic and inspiring leadership of Ben-Gurion. She was better at preaching and sermonizing rather than at exhorting and moving people to action. She had all the traits required for great leadership—integrity, moral resolve, determination, authenticity and inner conviction and discipline. But as she reached the top—the office of prime minister, she lacked the physical energy, initiative and the drive to mobilize Israelis at a time when the country seemed to be drifting like a rudderless ship. Golda held most of the major offices that her country, her party and the Labor Movement could offer. She acquitted herself with distinction and dignity in most of them but failed in her greatest test—that of the premiership. She could inspire some people to follow her lead, her courage and personal example, but was not always successful in creating enthusiasm for something new because in her declining years she was opposed to any new social or foreign policy experiments. She achieved huge success in convincing American Jews to contribute their money, but utterly failed to make them emulate what she did and follow her to Israel. She was no role model for them.

At an early age Golda broke away from the Jewish tradition—for her Zionism was a rebellion against the traditional Jewish way of life. In later years, she again became attached to some aspects of the Jewish tradition and refused to consider any legislation which would split the Jewish people apart, such as civil marriage in Israel. For her, tradition meant the orthodox tradition. She was not observant;

on the contrary, she smoked and drove on the Sabbath, loved nonkosher Chinese and other food. Her Judaism was not adherence to ritual. It was a religion of acting on behalf of her people. She started her public life by wanting to change the situation of her people; later she attempted to conserve and preserve what she and her colleagues had built and achieved in Israel.

Like other leaders of her generation, she did not separate her private from her public life. Both were intertwined and this included close and even intimate relations with some of her colleagues. Moments of frivolity and lightheartedness were rare. She was a very serious person; there were no pranks and few ribald jokes in her presence, although she loved juicy gossip. Her self-image was that of a soldier at her post, always alert, always on guard, ready to repel attacks and plots of evildoers at home and abroad.

Since she was absolutely certain of her cause and the ways to achieve it, as time went on, this was transformed into an almost intolerant dogmatism, coupled by a sense of self-righteousness. Anyone who dissented from her view was not “one of us”. She believed passionately and uncompromisingly that the rights of the Jews as a people were above all other rights and that these had to be asserted unequivocally. She coined the phrase “There is justice, and there is Jewish justice”. She had enough patience to listen to views of others but if they deviated from her own, she usually did not accept them as valid. She could never put herself in the shoes of the Arabs, least of all those of her main adversaries—Nasser and later Sadat. Even after Israel became the major military power in the Middle East after the Six Day War, she continued to speak of Israel’s weakness and vulnerability. For her, the Jews were and would always be the underdog.

“Golda is a woman of limited vision”, said Ben-Gurion, “but extremely clever”. She disliked being referred to as the soft grandmotherly prime minister of Israel—but she also detested the denigrating remark that she was the “only man in Ben-Gurion’s cabinet”. When asked to comment on this, she said wryly: “Men think it’s a compliment”. She saw childbearing as a tremendous privilege. Unfortunately, her own experiences of motherhood did not turn out to be such a privilege. On the contrary, she realized early on that she could not have two careers—motherhood and politics. The choice she made would be a source of constant suffering and the cause of permanent guilty feelings.

Her central and final tragedy was that all through her life she espoused peace according to Israel’s terms, but was involved in most of Israel’s wars and presided over the most terrible of them—the Yom Kippur War. She never tired of proclaiming her peaceful intentions, but deep in her heart she did not believe in the reality or the possibility of a peace with the Arabs that would take into account Israel’s minimal requirements.

She was a woman who upheld the need to accept the dictate of the party, to abide unquestionably by the party's collective wisdom and decisions, not to push for jobs or honors. She detested the word "running" for office. In the Labor Party no one "runs". People are promoted because of merit, performance, loyal and devoted service and seniority. Yet, beneath the facade of frailty, she was a very ambitious woman who thought she could do certain jobs far better than those who happened to occupy them at the time. She was self-effacing in her constant refusal to take on new responsibilities, but she was determined in her aspirations to assume higher positions and greater responsibilities. She never doubted her ability to handle just about any job in the land, but went through the accepted ritual of refusing to accept certain positions offered, only to relent afterwards. She was a very cautious leader, not prone to any great dramatic acts or quick changes of mood. There were no extreme changes in mood (which were later observed in Menachem Begin or Moshe Dayan). She was never hyperactive at one moment and passive or depressive at the next. She was steady, slow in expressing her thoughts, in becoming angry, but also very slow in forgetting or forgiving real or imagined slights.

She was a product of her time. She had the chance to participate in and shape events as much as some of them created her. Her life was inexorably tied to the growth and development of Zionist Socialism, the Labor Movement in Palestine, the Histadrut, the Hagannah underground defense organization, the Jewish Agency and the Government of Israel. She played a central role in all of them. In the process, both she and they grew and developed. However, as she reached the top, her own development ceased, her growth stopped and curiosity waned. Her age began to take its toll.

For Golda and for Israel it was a great tragedy that she had reached the apex of her power and influence at the advanced age of seventy-one. By then it was too late for her to change, adjust and capture the new mood of the country, the regional and global changes. This was her greatest moment of achievement, and also her great moment of failure. Deep inside she understood this, but she was too old and set in her ways to change. She refused to acknowledge that her energy was beginning to wane and the job had become onerous. Time was running out.

As she became the object of international adulation, she also became the target of growing criticism and impatience at home. Foreigners failed to understand why she commanded such respect abroad while there was growing skepticism at home over her capability to lead the country in turbulent times.

A woman of enormous contradictions, she became the mother of her nation, the grandmother of the Jewish people. She was among those who dominated the central arena of Yishuv and Israeli politics for half a century for better or for worse. She personified the embattled and determined Israel, surrounded by enemies set

to destroy the last hope of the Jewish people. No one could remain unaffected by the strength of her personality, not one could be indifferent or apathetic to her.

This is her story.



# 1 Origins (1898–1906)

Golda Meir was a classic product of the Eastern European Jewish ghetto, of the small town known as the *shtetl*, of debilitating misery and harsh existence, of a shabby life and a daily struggle for survival. Her family originated from White Russia, that marshy area around Pinsk, bordered by two rivers—Pripyat and Pina, where Jews eked a bare livelihood from fishing, portage and trading with the local peasants and middle class, acting as middlemen for both. The dominant personality in the family was her great-grandmother, after whom she was named. Great-grandmother (*bobbe*) Golda was known to have possessed a “man’s head”. She apparently had good common sense, was very orthodox and sought to meddle in the lives of all who surrounded her, a task in which she succeeded hugely.

For decades, Golda Meir’s mother, Blume, suffered a great deal under the heavy-handed tyranny of great-grandmother Golda. In later years she attempted unsuccessfully to play a similar role. Golda’s maternal grandfather, Menachem Naidich, was a yeshiva student, serious and stern, who barely left an impression on his granddaughter. Her father, Moshe Mabovich, was an orphan when he arrived in Pinsk. His father had served in the Czarist army for thirteen years, but managed to remain a Jew by shunning meat. Mabovich was one of thirteen children, of which only three survived, a common phenomenon in those days. He was sent to study at the well-known and prestigious yeshiva (religious school) in Slonim that produced some of the greatest Jewish minds in the past two centuries. But this was not for him, neither financially nor spiritually. He preferred to learn a trade and became a carpenter’s apprentice.

Seventy years later, when Prime Minister Golda Meir had an audience with Pope Paul VI in the Vatican, one of her aides mentioned to her hosts that she was a carpenter’s daughter. A Vatican official responded solemnly: “Carpenters are highly respected here”. Unfortunately, Mabovich was not respected and he barely made a living. When he courted Blume, he encountered vehement opposition from her mother who ruled that there had never been an artisan in the family and she saw no reason to change this tradition. Grandmother Golda had other ideas. She decreed that he could marry Blume and that it was no disaster that Mabovich was a carpenter as long as he was a *mensch* (a decent human being). She, of course, prevailed and the marriage was arranged. Blume was the eldest of eight children, six sisters and two brothers. Her own mother, Pessia-Feigel, Golda Meir’s grandmother, was, according to Golda’s older sister Sheina, the chronicler of the family history, an ordinary woman who led a difficult existence and was



constantly complaining and bickering, with one exception—no bickering on the Sabbath and Jewish holidays.<sup>1</sup>

Once married, Blume began to produce children. She bore eight, of which three girls survived. Death was a common occurrence among adults, but most often among babies. One of Sheina's early memories was the death of great-grandmother Golda, at the ripe old age of 90, after having ruled the family with an iron hand for decades. On a Friday morning, Bobbe Golda asked to be washed and dressed in a clean shift. Before the Sabbath, she sent for the rabbi and spoke briefly with him, then turned her face to the wall and fell silent. On Saturday morning she opened her eyes, summoned the entire family to her bedside and blessed them. She died after sunset.<sup>2</sup>

Shortly after Blume married Moshe Mabovich, their eldest daughter Sheina was born and survived. Her birth convinced Mabovich that living with his in-laws was too much of a burden. Besides, although he was becoming better at his trade, he failed to find a decent, well-paying job. He decided to leave his wife and child with her parents, and moved to Kiev to seek a change. But that was a mistake. He had no residence permit for Kiev and was briefly arrested once before a permit was arranged. He then sent for his wife and child. Sheina recalls in her memoirs that life in Kiev was miserable. He was barely making a living and the family constantly moved from one house to another, each one worse than its predecessor. Her mother became increasingly impatient with her lot and often quarreled with Mabovich who was mostly at home without work.<sup>3</sup>

A baby boy was born but survived only a few weeks. He caught a cold and was treated by his mother with folk medicine. She had him swabbed in cloth sprayed with turpentine and hog fat, causing the baby to die of asphyxiation. Once recovered, Blume took a job as a nursemaid while Mabovich established a carpentry shop in their tiny one-room apartment which also contained a miniature kitchen. The shop failed and Blume became despondent. Sheina was not sent to a public school and only briefly attended a Jewish school (*cheder*). Both parents agreed that girls did not require education, thereby adhering to the accepted Jewish norms.<sup>4</sup>

It was into these harsh circumstances that Golda Meir was born in Kiev on May 3, 1898 when Sheina was nine. She came to the world after numerous failed attempts by her parents to have children who would survive. Golda was born with

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<sup>1</sup> This chapter is based on the following: Sheina Korngold, *Memories*, Tel Aviv, 1966; Golda Meir, *My Life*, Tel Aviv, 1975; Golda Meir, *The House of my Father*, Tel Aviv, 1970; Menachem Meir, *My Mother Golda Meir*, New York, 1983; Marie Syrkin, *Woman with a Cause*, New York, 1963.

<sup>2</sup> Korngold, *Memories*, p. 16.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 20–24

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28.

the help of a midwife and was named after her great-grandmother. She developed well and as a baby demanded much attention, making Sheina extremely jealous, a situation that would last a lifetime and had far-reaching effects on Golda's future development. Sheina was now forced to do the chores of looking after Golda and later wrote: "Whatever Golda wanted, she could easily obtain". She also noted that Golda was a pretty child. Seeking attention would also be a typical Golda trait.<sup>5</sup>

For a while the family lived in a three-room house, the largest room set aside for the carpentry. There was also a well-lit kitchen and a bedroom. The family, which now consisted of the parents and two daughters, was soon joined by Moshe's mother, grandmother Tsippy, who came and stayed. Tsippy decided she did not want free meals, so she earned her living by running the household and thus coming almost at once into a conflict with her daughter-in-law Blume. There were constant arguments on how the house should be run, over expenses, food, what went for clothing and how to raise the girls. Golda's earliest memories were of endless arguments between her mother and grandmother and later, between the mother and Sheina. Tsippy was a restless woman, always busy, forever moving, cleaning, dusting, cooking and sewing. She hated idleness. Golda inherited these traits. In later years she could rarely sit still without doing something.

Tsippy, Blume and Sheina emerge from existing memoirs as very unhappy women, highly restless and discontent, for whom life was a constant ordeal they had to go through without much hope of improvement. From those early days Golda remembered the poverty, the freezing winters, on occasion hunger and fear. As food became scarce, Blume found work peeling potatoes in a nearby restaurant in return for a glass of milk which went to feed Golda. Another baby boy was born and died after a month.

Sheina recalled Golda as a pretty, well developed child, but noted that something was missing: there was a veil of sadness on her face. She had no toys, no dolls to play with. From early on she displayed another well-known trait—stubbornness. Tension between the two sisters started early. Sheina began to educate herself by reading from books she brought to the house. Golda was interested in the pictures and would take the books away from Sheina. One day she tore a page out of a book causing a crisis. Sheina was about to hit her when she was rescued by her mother. From then on, Sheina hid her books away from curious Golda.<sup>6</sup>

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5 *Ibid.*, p. 40.

6 *Ibid.*, pp. 40–42.

The arrival of a new baby girl, Tsipke (Clara), when Golda was three and Sheina twelve, changed the household routine. All affection was now showered on Tsipke—after all, she survived after so many natal disasters. Sheina now assumed responsibility for Golda while Blume was busy with Tsipke. Golda was no longer the baby—a change in her status. In the process of looking after Golda, Sheina became her surrogate mother. She now guided Golda in her reading and was later responsible for her initiation into Zionist and Socialist ideologies and activities. Years later, when Golda outshone her sister, this was a cause of much bitterness and resentment on the part of Sheina.

Already at this early stage, Golda craved love, affection and approval. Later, she sought admiration and praise. This she never got at home—neither from her parents nor from Sheina. “Sheina remained one of the great influences of my life—perhaps the greatest, apart from the man I married”, Golda wrote years later. “By any standards, she was an unusual person and for me she was a shining example—my dearest friend and my mentor. Even late in life...in fact Sheina was the one person whose praise and approval, when I won them, which was not easy, meant the most to me”.<sup>7</sup> Rare were the moments in which Sheina did praise Golda, more frequently she found fault with Golda’s way of life. She criticized her priorities, the way she raised her children, her friends. There was some validity to these feelings. In later years Golda often left her two children under Sheina’s care, especially when she had to travel abroad. On some of these occasions Sheina would act like a martyr causing Golda much pain and sense of guilt. For her part, she lavished love and affection on Sheina’s children as though they were her own and cared for her sister in her declining years.

In Pinsk she experienced the only event in her life that came close to a pogrom. Rumors spread in town of an impending pogrom. Golda and Tsipke were taken upstairs and placed under the care of friendly neighbors. Mabovich boarded the house door with wooden planks. Blume boiled water in preparation for a long siege and Sheina armed herself with a kitchen knife. Golda remembered the feeling of helplessness, the cowering, the fear, the impotence, all because they were Jews, and as such were under the protection of no one. Even then she realized they were different, vulnerable and utterly at the mercy of whoever wanted to harm them. She never saw a real pogrom, Jews being killed and houses burned or looted. But that experience was etched in her mind until her last days. She often claimed that it was a major influence on her decision to bring about a change in Jewish existence. At this early age she already understood the meaning of “us” (Jews) versus “them” (*Goyim*—Gentiles) and these identities accompanied her all her life.

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<sup>7</sup> Meir, *My Life*, p. 17.

From her early childhood she retained other bitter memories—of mud, dust and dirt, the swamps and spring floods, the filth and flies, which haunted her for the rest of her life. She became obsessively addicted to cleanliness which she relentlessly pursued and demanded of others. Psychologists claim that this is a clear sign of the absence of love and warmth at home. Even when she was foreign minister and prime minister, she would continue to wash her underwear and the dishes in the kitchen late at night, long after the last guest departed, even though she had staff to do this for her. She claimed that she did her best thinking while washing dishes or her hair, some of the few moments when she was alone and could fully concentrate. She detested untidiness in speech, dress, behavior and action. She also hated inaction and passivity, to her signs of Jews hiding from the roaring Cossaks taunting the frightened Jews.

At home the bickering never stopped. As she watched her grandmother, mother and older sister arguing for hours over trivial matters, she was determined that this would not happen to her. She abhorred discord and preferred conciliation over conflict, resolving problems rather than exacerbating them. I have a rule in my life, she once said, if you can arrange matters without a scandal, arrange them, so that you can restore balance and peace of mind.<sup>8</sup>

Before she celebrated her fifth birthday, the family moved to Pinsk where Mabovich, for unknown reasons, was under the impression that he was going to improve his lot. Pinsk was then a major center of Jewish learning and political action, a cradle of Zionism. The family now lived with grandparents Naiditch. But as things did not improve, Mabovich slowly mulled over the logical conclusion reached by millions of Jews at the time: he would emigrate to America. He was neither a Zionist, nor a Socialist, and he never had any intention of assimilating into the hostile non-Jewish environment. There remained one avenue of escape, to try his luck across the Atlantic Ocean. As was the custom of the time, he would go first, leaving his family behind, save some money and send ship tickets for them to follow. When he left for America Golda was barely five, Clara one and Sheina—fourteen. Now there began a period known as “life of paper”, waiting for letters from America to arrive. For the next three years the family was without a father. This left an imprint on Golda and made it easier for her to accept the fact that her children could be without their mother for long periods when she traveled abroad, leaving her children in the care of her sister.

It was Sheina who introduced Golda to Zionism. Sheina made her own way to Zionism when she became a member of a small youth group with ten other high school students who met at the home of Chaya Lichtenstein, the sister of the

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<sup>8</sup> Yitzhak Rafael, *I did not Win the Light from Nothing*, Jerusalem, 1981.

rising Zionist leader and future first president of Israel, Chaim Weizmann. In the style of the times, they formed a circle, or study group, discussing and arguing over political and social issues, anti-Semitism, the Jewish Question. They also read forbidden pamphlets dealing with revolutionary ideas. Meetings were held in secret, sometimes in the synagogue after Sabbath services. This may have been the source of Golda's future insistence on secrecy. Her dictum was: what you don't have to publicize, don't. On rare occasions meetings were held at the Naiditch home where Golda, age seven, participated in her first illegal political meeting. Increasingly the group's discussions focused on the perennial question "What is to be done?"

One answer was Zionism, the response of a tiny minority among Jews. It meant the eventual creation of a Jewish homeland in its ancient patrimony, Palestine. Another road was to pursue the social-revolutionary movement of Russia which called for a revolutionary overthrow of the Czarist regime, its replacement by a Socialist rule and thus, they believed, an end to anti-Semitism. Many young Jews were attracted by a synthesis of both ideologies and became Zionists-Socialists. For them, the establishment of a Jewish State would be incomplete unless it would become Socialist. In July 1904 the founder of modern Zionism, Theodore Herzl, died in Vienna. His death came as a shock to millions of Jews. Golda recalled that an aunt came to their home in tears: Herzl was dead. "I have never forgotten the stunning silence with which we received the news. My sister Sheina wore black clothes from that day until we arrived in America two years later".<sup>9</sup> Sheina's involvement with Zionism and socialism led to renewed tensions with Blume. Attendance at illegal political meetings could lead to arrest and possible deportation to Siberia. Blume was terrified of the long arm of the Czarist police and its secret agents. By then Sheina was a determined young woman with a mind (and tongue) of her own and resisted her mother. In her memoirs Golda wrote that Sheina preached to her: "There is one way to do anything: the right way". At fifteen, Sheina was already a perfectionist, a young woman who lived according to her principles, whatever the price, a severe taskmaster, stern and austere. Sheina did her own thing and continued to attend the meetings. Golda learned a simple lesson which would stand her in good stead for the rest of her life—if you persist, you eventually get your way.<sup>10</sup>

The two sisters were still at loggerheads, usually over trivial matters such as books. Golda became increasingly curious and inquisitive. She managed to obtain a notebook into which she copied the alphabet letters from prayer books

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<sup>9</sup> Amos Eilon, Herzl, Tel Aviv, 1977, p. 440.

<sup>10</sup> Meir, My Life, p. 20.

she found in her grand-parents home. Her mother was not convinced of the usefulness of Golda learning to read and write. Fortunately for Golda, Sheina once again took over her initial education, teaching her the rudiments of arithmetic, reading and writing.

From America, Mabovich wrote that he had arrived in New York, but not finding work there, the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS) suggested that he move west to a city called Milwaukee in the state of Wisconsin, which both he and his family had never heard of. The HIAS social worker convinced him that his chances of getting work there were far better than in New York and supplied him with a rail ticket. Once in Milwaukee, he did find work with a railway company and started saving money to bring his family over.

Back in Pinsk, Blume began working as a confectioner in a bakery and once again moved with her daughters to a one-room apartment with a tiny kitchen attached. It was in the poor section of Pinsk, on an unpaved dirty lane. Now they existed under the expectation that soon money would arrive and the entire family would travel to the *Goldene Medina* (the Golden Country). Letters from Milwaukee were increasingly more cheerful. Mabovich wrote that he found a job, settled down and would soon send for them. Soon he was able to save enough money. Just after Passover 1906, there was a tearful departure scene at the Pinsk railway station as Blume and her three daughters embarked on the long trek to America.

Leaving Russia at the time meant forging documents, contacting smugglers who would get the family across the border into Austria and put them on the train to Vienna. The smugglers stole or lost the few belongings the family possessed. They managed to escape unnoticed from Russia and headed to Vienna and from there to Antwerp. Throughout the ordeal, Sheina noted that Golda was very quiet and serious. Golda recalled that Tsipke cried incessantly, mostly during the two days they spent in a freezing shack near the Russian-Austrian border.<sup>11</sup> In Antwerp they contacted a HIAS representative who arranged lodgings and clothing. Antwerp was the first major Western European city Golda encountered and it impressed her greatly. It was clean, neat, bustling and also full of well-dressed orthodox Jews. But there was not much time for sightseeing. Passage was booked on a lower-deck cabin for eight on one of the many immigrant steamers that plied the Atlantic, which did not even have a dining section. Of the entire family, Golda did not suffer from seasickness. In the future she would be a very good traveler in cars, ships, trains, airplanes and even helicopters.

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.; Korngold, *Memories*, pp. 74–86.

The crossing took two weeks and the ship docked in Quebec City, thereby sparing the family the ordeal of going through New York and Ellis Island. From Quebec City they took the train to Montreal and from there to Chicago, finally arriving in Milwaukee in early June 1906. This would be Golda's home for the next fifteen years.

What remained in her memory of her childhood in Eastern Europe? How did those years shape her character and personality and world outlook? As she grew older, Golda would often go back to her early childhood and ruminate about those formative years of her life, pouring out stories about grandparents and parents. In those years, when she herself was already a grandmother, she was far more charitable to her parents. She described her mother as “copper-haired, pretty, energetic, bright and far more sophisticated and enterprising than my father, but like him, a born optimist and very sociable”.<sup>12</sup> Her father, too, “was optimistic, much given to believing in people, unless and until proven wrong, a trait that, on the whole, was to make his life a failure in worldly terms”.<sup>13</sup>

Golda was very honest when she described the world of the *shtetl* as a miserable place:

The *shtetl*, reconstructed in novels and films, which has become known today in places my grandparents never even heard of, that gay, heart-warming, charming *shtetl* on whose roofs fiddlers eternally play sentimental music, has almost nothing to do with anything I remember. The poverty-stricken, wretched little communities in which Jews eked out a living, comforting themselves with the hope that things would somehow be better one day and with their belief that there was a point to their misery.<sup>14</sup>

The *shtetl* was the place where she grew up without much parental love and affection. Her parents were just too busy making a bare living to worry about their second daughter. In any case, during her formative years, her father never wielded any authority at home, and for years he was away in America. She was left to the care of her older sister who was already growing jealous of Golda. She does not recall moments of endearment, of parental expressions of approval and satisfaction or praise about what she was doing, or being coddled, tucked in and told bedside stories, or of any guidance and instructions from them or from her grandparents. She missed that affection very much, and would find it for the first time years later when she left home with the man she would marry. But during those childhood years, the impressions Golda remembered of her elders was of a

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<sup>12</sup> Meir, *My Life*, p. 12.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15. See also Yossi Goldstein, *Golda—A Biography*, Beer Sheva, 2012, pp. 11–16.

tough, grim, severe mother, a querulous and domineering grandmother, a useless father and a strong-willed older sister.

Growing up in a home where women set the tone and where the men did not really play a meaningful role and her father even failed to provide for his family, she saw nothing unique about a woman such as herself, rising slowly to positions of power and influence. From her early childhood she craved for harmony and stability, even though in later years she would not always shun conflict or confrontation she preferred to avoid them. Her childhood experiences taught her the need for law and order, stability, and security and assured income as the basis for a working social and political order. But there remained for many years a sense of insecurity, at times verging on fear. She managed to overcome that haunting feeling of insecurity years later, but she always retained a sense of her own inferiority. She was a shy girl, not aggressive, non-combative, perhaps because she grew up in a home full of tension, conflict and insecurity, coupled with hunger, poverty and physical fear of the outside, non-Jewish world. Basically she had a lonely childhood with almost no games, fun or laughter. She never sought to emulate her parents who certainly were not role models, or her older sister who became, for all intents and purposes, a mother substitute. She had, as Ben-Gurion sneeringly remarked years later, “a difficult childhood”. She never looked back at her early years with nostalgia. They were never the good old days. They were in fact the very bad old days of hunger, fear, cold and dirt, and a barren emotional life, where the need for parental love and affection went unfulfilled. Rewards were never given, criticism often voiced. When she became a mother, all this would change. She would be a far better mother, but she also became an absentee mother. Years later, she would jokingly speak of the old country, but in fact referred to the United States and not to Russia. She never went back to Pinsk and Kiev, not even when she served as Israel’s Minister Plenipotentiary in Moscow in 1948–1949. This was mainly because the Soviet Government forbade any such travel; but also because she had no interest in going back to her roots. They ceased to interest her the moment the family left for America. She would always look ahead to new challenges rather than linger on the past. She had no illusions about her Eastern European roots. She was never ashamed of them, nor was she proud of this Diaspora way of living. It had to be changed. There would be few who would understand the need to transform the Jewish condition and would later bring it off successfully. Golda would be one of them.



## 2 Milwaukee (1906–1921)

The Mabovich family, according to current statistics, were four of the 153,748 Russian Jews who immigrated to the United States in 1906, seeking a new life in a new country. But for the majority, at least during their first years in America, they exchanged one ghetto for another. In the case of the Maboviches, they moved from the *shtetl* of Pinsk to the *shtetl* of Milwaukee. For those immigrants who had no relatives to welcome them to America, the process of integrating in the new country proved to be very difficult and prolonged. The lucky ones joined relatives who preceded them to America, and managed better by having a close relation help them overcome the initial culture shock involved in the process of their transplantation from Russia to America.

Golda's first shock was how her father looked as he met the weary travelers at the Milwaukee railway station. "He seemed changed. Beardless, American looking, in fact a stranger", she wrote in her memoirs.<sup>1</sup> She then took her first automobile ride from the station to the one-room apartment Mabovich rented from another immigrant family. The American dream was far from being realized on that first day. In fact, from now on, with the exception of school, she would be surrounded by Yiddish-speaking Eastern European Jewish immigrants who lived in almost the same squalor and poverty she had hoped they had left behind forever in Pinsk.

In the three years since he had arrived in America, Mabovich had been unable to advance himself economically. He did find odd jobs as a carpenter and was able to save a little, much of which he used to bring his family over. Like many other Jewish workers, he joined a labor union and even an Orthodox congregation, but was active in neither. His English was virtually non-existent and Yiddish continued to be the spoken language at home until Golda enrolled at public school and was forced to learn English in order to comprehend her studies. For the eight-year old Golda, America appeared to be a place of great adventure and unlimited opportunities, provided one had ambitions and language skills. In comparison, Sheina rebelled almost from the first day. She refused to dress in the modern "American" dress her father bought her in Shuster's Department

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<sup>1</sup> Meir, *My Life*, p. 23; Korngold, *Memories*, p. 86; see also Ralph Martin, *Golda Meir—the Romantic Years*, New York, 1988; Elinor Burkett, *Golda*, New York, 2008; Regina Medzini, *Reminiscences*, Jerusalem, private printing, 1985; Interview with Regina Medzini, University of Wisconsin, 1979; Blema Steinberg, *Women in Power: The Personalities and Leadership Style of Indira Gandhi*, Golda Meir and Margaret Thatcher, Montreal, 2008. See also Moshe Gilboa, "First Steps", in Meir Avizohar, ed. *Golda- The Rise of a Leader*, Tel Aviv, 1994, pp. 13–39. For the Milwaukee years see also Goldstein, *Golda*, pp. 11–36.

Store the day after they arrived.<sup>2</sup> It was harder for her to learn English at age seventeen, and she spoke it with a very heavy accent to her last days. Being 17, she was expected by her parents to help in the house until she would find a suitable match and marry. Steeped in Socialist ideology, Sheina could not see herself stuck in a house with a dominant mother and a passive father. Years later, in an interview with Julie Nixon, the younger sister Clara noted: “My father was really a wonderful person but he simply was not successful”.<sup>3</sup> As a result their mother developed an obsession: her daughters should marry a good provider in order to escape the poverty. Until then they should remain at home.

Writing in “The World of Our Fathers”, Irving Howe noted that when it came to women, American and Jewish expectations pointed in one direction—marriage and motherhood. The most desirable job for a Jewish girl was teaching. But this meant she had to be supported through teachers training college, a two-year course. Other options were clerical jobs such as filing and typing, sales clerk in a big department store or staying at home. Some girls rebelled or “were drawn to the revolutionary thought they had a right to an autonomous selfhood”.<sup>4</sup> While Sheina was constantly restless, Golda was enrolled in second grade at Public School no. 4 and began to do well.

Shortly after their arrival, the family moved to a new apartment on Vliet Street in the heart of the Jewish ghetto. It consisted of a large store that soon became a grocery shop run by Blume, and two large rooms behind the store. The grocery became the focus of the family life and the source of their meager income. Mabovich tried his luck as a contractor but was often out of work. Whoever could help in the store was enlisted. Initially that meant Sheina and later Golda, both of whom detested it and felt like servants locked up in their place of servitude.<sup>5</sup>

By the end of 1906, Golda had picked up rudimentary English and made two life long friendships with Sarah Feder and Regina Hamburger, two Eastern European immigrant children like herself. Half of their class at P.S. 4 consisted of non-Jews, mainly of German origin, with whom there was virtually no contact. At this time, Sheina had had enough of wrangling with their mother and left home, renting a room nearby, and to the dismay of her parents found a job. Her departure meant that Golda was now needed in the store more often, which became the cause of endless friction between her and Blume. Golda was often absent from school and on occasion a truant officer would appear at the Mabovich home to inquire about the cause of her absences. She was able to make up for her absences

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<sup>2</sup> Korngold, *Memories*, p. 88.

<sup>3</sup> Julie Nixon, *Special People*, New York, 1978, p. 19.

<sup>4</sup> Irving Howe, *The World of Our Fathers*, New York, 1976, pp. 265–267.

<sup>5</sup> Korngold, *Memories*, p. 90.

by applying herself diligently to her school work and was noted and encouraged by her teachers to study harder. They realized she had an inquisitive mind which she often displayed by asking many questions.

During the summer vacations, from age ten, she and Regina worked as sales-girls at Gimbel's Department Store in downtown Milwaukee, earning three dollars a week, which they handed over to their mothers. They even denied themselves the five-cent car-fare and walked to the store, a forty-five minute walk each way. This was Golda's first experience as a working girl and it taught her the meaning of clocking in, rigid hours, arbitrary firing, being harassed by foremen and the need to be nice to unpleasant customers.

To make up for the barren cultural-spiritual life at home, she developed reading habits which brought Regina and her to the nearby public library a number of times a week. They read the classics "War and Peace", "Anna Karenina" and other 19<sup>th</sup> century Russian writers—Gogol, Chechov, Dostoyevsky. They read French writers—France, Hugo, Maupassant, and the English novelists Galsworthy, Wells, Dickens and topped this with American writers—Mark Twain, Sinclair Lewis, Nathaniel Hawthorne and others. There was much time for reading at night or when the store was closed. In later years Golda did not quote the classical writers in her speeches but kept up her reading well into her forties. After that she was too busy to enjoy a good book. Golda continued to do well at school and soon climbed to the top of the class. Her strength was not in her written work but rather in oral communication. Even at this tender age she was able to explain complicated matters in a simple language and delve into the heart of the matter at once. This would serve her well throughout her public career. Unlike other girls her age, she did not keep a diary and was not a good letter writer. What remains, however, are many postcards and few long letters, which separated her from her contemporaries in the future leadership of Israel. This did not mean she was not introspective. But she was not interested in putting down her thoughts on paper, lacked the sense of history and the need to record history and later her own role in making history. Writing was seen by her at times as idleness and waste of time instead of achieving something concrete.

Hers was a childhood with books, but no fun and games and little music. As she grew older, Golda was taken by her older sister to lectures, concerts and poetry readings. She would justify this to Blume by saying that the lecturers were all known Jewish writers and poets, some of them were at times put up by her family in their apartment. Her mother may have thought this would be a nice way to meet the right man and eventually marry. Her parents did not encourage Golda to read, they preferred to see her finishing elementary school and work at the store. On rare occasions, when Golda was a nuisance, her mother would say: "Take a book in your hands and sit and read". But more often Blume would

complain: “Always with her nose stuck in a book”. There was little encouragement at home to do better in school. In any case, her parents could not help her because they barely spoke English. In the absence of parental guidance, Golda tried to learn from visitors who would come and stay in their apartment, usually emigrants from Pinsk. Some claimed distant relationship, others mutual acquaintances. Most of them were simply making their first steps in America and needed a temporary roof over their heads. The common language was Yiddish. The only one who now spoke English almost fluently was Golda. She would help people fill out forms for job applications. She learned how to help people and explained to them the American reality of how to get a job, joining a labor union and what happened if they fell ill or were dismissed. She began to develop a special instinct to help needy people.

The little she knew about labor unions was explained to her by her father. Since this was America, there was no fear of pogroms or for physical safety. The family conversation revolved more about school, the store, and gossip. The local and Jewish political dimension was provided as usual by Sheina. She once again opened up for Golda the world of Zionism and socialism. In 1906, the year of their arrival in Milwaukee, a number of Jewish intellectuals from Eastern Europe founded the Milwaukee branch of Poalei Zion (The Workers of Zion), the Zionist-Socialist organization founded in Russia a year earlier.<sup>6</sup> Poalei Zion’s ideology was not revolutionary but rather an evolutionary approach to the resolution of the Jewish Problem. The spiritual father of this body was Dov Ber Borochoy (1881–1917), whose ideology was based on Marxism, historical materialism mixed with Zionism. Analyzing the Jewish fate, led him to conclude that the only normal basis for this people was its own national territory, since the source of the anomaly of Jewish life was the absence of such territory. This accounted for the many distortions in Jewish life. Being a Socialist, he argued that the absence of a national territory of their own meant that Jewish workers lacked a strategic base for class struggle that would eventually liberate the working class and humanity as a whole. Only the concentration of all Jews in their own country, in Palestine, would enable the creation of a national Jewish economy and the development of a Jewish working class.

He claimed that Jewish immigration to Palestine was a necessity created by the existing situation of the Jews and it would be a major factor in the fulfillment of Zionism. As the working class in the world had a role to play in liberating human society, the Jewish worker too would liberate his own people. Zionism for

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<sup>6</sup> Lewis Switchkow and Lloyd Gertner, *History of the Jews in Milwaukee*, Philadelphia, 1963, pp. 235–255

Borochof was as inevitable as socialism. The goals of Poalei Zion were the fulfillment of socialism and the establishment in Palestine of a Zionist-Socialist society, just, equal, progressive, defending itself by its own means, speaking Hebrew, returning to the soil and not exploiting others, and finally creating the required institutions to implement these lofty goals. It is unlikely that at this tender age Golda was able to grasp the intricacies of this ideology. Sheina did her best to explain to her its rudimentary points.

In Milwaukee, the local Poalei Zion branch was initially engaged in raising funds for educational institutions such as the *Folk Schule* where workers would be educated.<sup>7</sup> For the young emigrants, the movement became the focus of their otherwise dreary lives. It gave them something to do with their spare time, they could listen to speakers and hold discussions, meet similar-minded people, argue late into the night (in Yiddish), hold picnics and raise funds. Among their projects was a library with Yiddish, English and Hebrew books in addition to Russian volumes. Some of the meetings were held at the Mabovich home and Moshe joined the movement but was never active. His daughter Sheina became the central figure in the branch.

Among the silent observers of the proceedings was young Golda, barely ten years old, who stayed up late at night to absorb new ideas and listen to endless debates. When she failed to understand, Sheina was there to explain to her the intricacies of Marxism. At age 14, Golda, now well-developed with an expressive face, brown eyes and a stubborn mouth, joined Poalei Zion in her own right.

At the end of 1912, a major argument erupted at home over the issue of her attending high school. She did very well in elementary school, earning high grades in most of the subjects. Blume was not impressed and pursued her main goal, how to find the right man for Golda when the time would come. By then a major development occurred at home. Sheina developed a touch of tuberculosis and was sent to Denver, Colorado, up in the Rocky Mountains, to convalesce. Golda now had to shoulder greater responsibilities at home. At this time she began to demonstrate her organizing skills. Together with Regina, she established an association they grandly called “American Young Sisters Society”, designed to help purchase textbooks for needy girls. At twelve she already held a fundraising event that was even mentioned in the local press. This was her first taste of fundraising and in later years she would be among the top fundraisers for the Histadrut, the labor movement and later for Israel.

After lengthy arguments she was able to convince her mother to let her enroll at the North Division High School. Her own memories of the time are replete with

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

bitter arguments at home over just about everything. Her mother, who resisted Golda's growing independence, wanted her to get married early, preferably to a good provider. Her father was rarely consulted and kept quiet on the subject. Her travails were shared with Regina and Sara in Milwaukee and through letters with Sheina in Denver. She related how her parents were not happy with her frequent attendance at lectures and cultural events. She now became an important figure in the Poalei Zion branch and was no longer under the shadow of her sister. For Golda this was a way of enriching an otherwise stifling and culturally barren life at home and of avoiding the constant shouting matches with her mother. Her parents feared that her activities would give her a bad name, thus lessening her chances of finding the right man. They also dreaded that the eligible men in the Poalei Zion movement were penniless young immigrants whose future prospects were bleak. Golda herself was terrified that an early marriage and starting a family would mean that she would be doomed to remain in America with no challenge or chances for self-advancement.

By 1914 it became clear that her mother already had in mind a specific man, Mr. Goodstein, then aged 30. Golda knew that marrying a man almost twice as old as herself, would be a disaster. She was desperate and decided to escape from home. Her sister and future brother in law, Shamaï Krongold, invited her to come to Denver until the storm would blow over. Together with Regina, they planned the escape carefully. One evening Golda packed a bag and lowered it to the street, where Regina waited to grab it. The next morning, they made their way to the station together, where Golda boarded a train to Denver. A day later Regina had to admit to her own parents her involvement in the escapade and was soundly beaten for her efforts. The fact that their daughter ran away from home was a terrible blow to the Maboviches. Regina informed Golda by mail that rumors circulated in the Jewish ghetto that Golda had eloped with an Italian man. Her parents finally settled on telling those interested that Golda went to Denver to help her ailing sister and would soon be back. The twenty-four-hour train ride to Denver was the first manifestation of her steely will. She had acted on her own instinct and gotten away with it. From then on, she would make the decisions regarding her life herself—how to run it, with whom to associate, whom she would marry and where she would live.

In Denver, she lived with her sister Sheina who enrolled her in a local high school. Among those who frequented Sheina's small home, that still exists in what is now the heart of downtown Denver, was a poor immigrant from Russia who worked as a sign painter when he could find work. His name was Morris Meyerson and Golda liked him almost at first sight. Five years older than Golda, he was gentle, considerate, self-taught, then 21. He read a great deal, knew much about music and art. Morris became a prime source of information on music,

poetry, literature and politics. But he was not a Zionist, so Golda's sister Sheina continued to be her mentor in its ideology and in eventually realizing the dream of settling in Palestine. Morris described himself as a cosmopolitan-universalist Jew. At this stage this did not bother Golda. He supplied what she lacked at home—love, affection and approval. Morris was the first to give her a sense of belonging and being an important person. In a postcard to Regina she admitted that he was not very handsome, but “he has a beautiful soul”. They saw each other almost daily and Golda found herself in love with this man. When the storm in Milwaukee finally subsided, her parents offered amnesty, and after a year she returned to Milwaukee to finish high school. Morris remained in Denver and the relationship continued in letters. Unexpectedly Morris followed her. In an excited postcard to Regina she wrote on November 15, 1915:

Dear Regina,

I have the greatest surprise for you. Morris arrived late last night. Don't be angry that I didn't let you know before. I didn't know either. Regina, can you imagine my happiness. I am the happiest person alive.<sup>8</sup>

Morris's arrival filled her life with contentment. She had entered into a truce with her mother who now had to get used to the idea that her daughter was going to marry a poor nobody. Blume was convinced that Golda was throwing away her life and future on a useless person. But there was little she could do and she had to resign herself to her future son in law. There is little information about Meyer-son's family and he is rarely mentioned in the family chronicles. This period in Golda's life revolved around Morris, Poalei Zion, school, girlfriends and home. In her own memoirs and in later interviews on the period 1915–1917, she barely mentions the First World War, the 1916 presidential elections in America, or local Wisconsin politics. She was interested in her own little world and that was all you can expect of a 17-years old woman deeply in love.

In 1916 a new interest appeared in Golda's life—Palestine. It is not clear when she came to the conclusion that there would not be much of a future for her in America. She could not see what the New World could offer a poor Jewish girl, married to a poor sign painter, both without college education, doomed to live in poverty like their parents, at the fringe of American society. She was never infected by the American bug of optimism. Being a Zionist and a Socialist, Palestine seemed to be the solution to some of her personal problems. She would go and live there, become a pioneer, fulfill her dreams and escape from her family and the wretchedness of the Milwaukee Jewish ghetto. In Palestine, where a new

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<sup>8</sup> Postcard in the possession of the author.

society was being created, she could make her own contribution and perhaps even become somebody who could influence the course of events. The concept of being “somebody” was always on her mind.

Now she made an effort to learn more about Palestine, mainly from word of mouth. She rarely missed an opportunity to meet visiting emissaries from Palestine (called the “Palestinians” in her memoirs), drew from them every bit of information she could obtain and was determined that soon she would go there. In late 1916 she met such a “Palestinian”—David Ben-Gurion. He came to the United States following his expulsion from Palestine by the Turks. He traveled extensively in America, appearing for Poalei Zion, drumming up support for the idea of a Jewish legion that would fight as part of the British army to liberate Palestine from the Turks and with their help create a future Jewish state. When he came to Milwaukee, Golda decided to attend a concert with Morris rather than attending his lecture. Her priorities angered her comrades who cancelled a lunch for Ben-Gurion at the Mabovich home the next day. When she finally met him her impression was that he was “the least approachable man I ever knew and there was something about him, even then, that made it hard for one to get to know him”.<sup>9</sup> This feeling persisted for the next fifty-seven years, although over the years she became one of his greatest admirers (and towards the end of his life his harsh critic).

A contemporary described Golda at the time as one “who already belonged to the Poalei Zion and even then was a good English and Yiddish speaker. Those were the early years of her development as a leader. Even then, her innate talent had begun to reveal itself—free from stage fright, courageous and possessing a reservoir of energy”. In 1917, representing Poalei Zion, Golda became involved in the activities of another organization, the recently founded American Jewish Congress. She began to address a growing number of gatherings and meetings and drew growing audiences.<sup>10</sup> The theme of her speeches was the need to secure a Jewish state in Palestine and the need for freedom for Jews wherever they lived. One incident showed how she operated in those days. She supported the nomination of two pro-Zionists as delegates to the coming American Jewish Congress convention. One synagogue banned the supporters of these candidates from appearing and instead brought an anti-Zionist Reform rabbi who preached a purely religious sermon. This disappointed a large crowd of Poalei Zion members and forced Golda to find a solution. In the words of a witness:

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<sup>9</sup> Meir, *My Life*, p. 44; Shabtai Teveth, *Ben-Gurion, The Burning Ground*, Boston, 1987, p. 108.

<sup>10</sup> Lewis Switchkow, “Memoirs of a Milwaukee Labor Leader”, in Lloyd P. Gertner, ed. *Michael—On the History of the Jews in the Diaspora*, Tel Aviv, 1975, Vol. III, p. 139.



the young chavera (comrade) Golda Mabovich, who was with us near the synagogue said: 'Listen to me. Someone bring me a bench and when they leave the synagogue we will detain them and speak outside'. The plan was accepted. When the Jews left the synagogue chaver Albert Lewis cried out in his ringing voice: 'Attention my friends—we have something to tell you'. The crowd remained standing near the door and the synagogue's steps. Golda stood upon the bench and began with the words: My dear fellow Jews, we are very sorry that we are detaining you at the door of a holy place, but it is not our fault—it is the fault of your leaders—the president and trustees who closed the door to our people. We applied and asked to say a few words to you in the customary and more conventional manner... but your leaders did not allow our committees that which they allowed others, so we are compelled to act in this way<sup>11</sup>

The plan succeeded and her audience was captivated by her simple forthright manner and self-assurance. It failed to impress her parents, who, after hearing rumors that their daughter was addressing crowds on street corners and of the sensational event at the synagogue, prohibited her from further such activities. The edict was soon withdrawn. Needless to say, her pro-Zionist candidates won.

The Balfour Declaration of November 2, 1917 in which the British Government promised to “view with favor the establishment of a national Jewish homeland in Palestine” filled Golda with elation. At this time she was in the midst of a major campaign to turn Morris into a Zionist and, worse for him, to immigrate with her to Palestine and live on a *kibbutz*. He was not convinced there was need for Jews to have their homeland. Never a committed Zionist like Golda, he felt at home in America, believing that Jews could live anywhere and that nationalism was a disaster for humanity. He was probably terrified of living in that faraway country, on a collective settlement, working the land. It soon dawned on him that if he wanted to marry Golda it would hinge on him accompanying her to Palestine. This was not a good omen for the future relationship of the young couple. Her condition that they go to Palestine in fact doomed the marriage even before it took place. In a letter to Golda, Morris explained his worldview:

I don't know whether to be glad or sorry that you seem to be so enthusiastic a nationalist. I am altogether passive in this matter although I give full credit for your activity, as I do to all others engaged in doing something towards helping a distressed nation...The idea of Palestine or any other territory for the Jews is, for me, ridiculous. Racial persecution does not exist because some nations have no territories but because nations exist at all.<sup>12</sup>

Morris probably misjudged Golda's strength of character and determination and may have felt that in time she would outgrow this infatuation with politics and

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 63–64.

<sup>12</sup> Eliyahu Agress, Golda, Tel Aviv, 1966, p. 17.

Palestine, once they married and settled down. He apparently failed to take seriously her commitment to Zionism, thinking that similar to so many American Zionists, then and now, she was willing to talk a lot, take part in demonstrations, raise some funds, but would remain in the United States. To his great horror, he soon discovered that Golda was different. She was made of sterner stuff. She meant every word she uttered and was determined to follow through with her convictions and self-fulfillment. The truth is that she wanted both—a husband she loved and respected and the unknown country where she wanted to participate in nation-building. It took some five years for Golda to realize that she could not have both. The marriage was on the rocks even before they said their vows.

Golda graduated from high school in June 1916. In her high school yearbook someone wrote: “Those about her, from her shall read the perfect ways of honor”. She enrolled at the Milwaukee Teachers Training College where she studied for two years, until 1918. During that time she taught immigrant children at the Folk Schule in both English and even German (her main foreign language at school). Forty years later, she broke a vow never to speak German after the Holocaust, when she found herself conversing in that language with a visiting German official, explaining that she taught English to German immigrants in Milwaukee.<sup>13</sup>

Golda and Morris were married at her family home on Christmas Eve 1917. The ceremony was performed by the leading Jewish scholar in Milwaukee Rabbi Scheinfeld, in front of whose synagogue she had created a fracas six months earlier. Although both Golda and Morris preferred a civil ceremony with no reception, she yielded to her mother’s wishes and had a traditional wedding. There is no mention of a honeymoon. The newly wedded couple rented a room nearby until such time when they would go to Palestine. For the next two years Golda became increasingly involved with the organizational work of Poalei Zion, while Morris sought work as a sign painter. In her memoirs she admitted that she was often away from home, traveling in many cities in the United States and Canada making speeches for the movement and selling shares for its newspaper. During her long absences Morris consoled himself by painting their tiny apartment, occasionally working and helping to look after younger sister Clara.

Her first exposure to national Jewish politics came in Christmas 1918 when she participated as a delegate from Milwaukee in the national convention of the American Jewish Congress held in Philadelphia. The main item on the agenda was how to ensure that the American delegation to the Versailles Peace Conference safeguard the civil rights of Jews in post-war Europe. This was the first time

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**13** Shlomo Shafir, *The Extended Hand—The German Social Democrats and their Attitude to Jews and Israel*, Tel Aviv, 1986, p. 110.

she attended a major gathering and it left a tremendous impression on her. From Philadelphia she sent Regina the following postcard:

This is the life. I suppose you have read all about the Congress. It was the most wonderful thing imaginable. Between the congress and the convention I've been resting and having a good time...<sup>14</sup>

This seemingly innocent and slightly girlish postcard explains the transformation in her life. From now on she would be addicted to politics. This would be her new environment. Here she felt at home, where she moved with poise and grace. Here was the twenty-year-old delegate from Milwaukee making her first steps in Jewish politics and loving every minute of it. It would be difficult after this to return to the tiny flat in Milwaukee and to dour and gloomy Morris. She had tasted for the first time the fruit of politics and found it fascinating. Morris may have complained quietly about the new life-style of his bride. Her father was more vocal when he protested her frequent trips to distant places while leaving Morris behind. Mabovich failed to be impressed even when his daughter was elected a delegate to a national convention. As far as he was concerned a wife should stay at home and look after her husband.

The year 1919 was spent in the same fashion. Golda taught English in Milwaukee and traveled for the movement to various meetings while making sure they did not have children before they went to Palestine. She was now saving money for the fare for the long trans-Atlantic voyage to the promised -land. A year later, together with Regina and her first husband Yossel, they moved to New York, the four of them renting an apartment in Morningside Heights in Manhattan.

The years 1920 and the first half of 1921 were apparently not the happiest in their lives. Years later, their son Menachem wrote in his memoirs that Golda spent much time in meetings with Poalei Zion members, learning as much as she could about Palestine. Morris was far more interested in exploring the cultural scene and the delights that New York had to offer in theater, opera and books. Golda was not keen on sightseeing while Morris toured extensively in New York arguing that this might be their last chance to see the big city. Why waste time in meetings, he asked? There would be plenty of time for that in Palestine.<sup>15</sup>

Finally they saved enough money and very cheap tickets were purchased on an Italian vessel called the Pocohantes. Before going to Palestine, Golda went back to Milwaukee to bid farewell to her family. Stopping off in Chicago to visit her sister Sheina, who now lived there, she heard her brother-in-law Shamai

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<sup>14</sup> Postcard in the possession of the author.

<sup>15</sup> Meir, *My Mother Golda Meir*, p. 13.

suggest to Sheina that they, together with their daughter Judith and son Chaim, also join Golda and Morris and immigrate to Palestine. There is no record about Golda's reaction to this idea. She had no alternative but to agree. In retrospect this was a mistake. Part of the reason for going to Palestine was to get away not only from her parents but also, and perhaps, especially, from her dominant sister. Sheina had been giving Golda solicited and unsolicited advice for years. After Golda married Morris, Sheina may have noted that Golda was becoming far more involved in public affairs and less with her husband. Sheina was in fact responsible for this marriage and was not very charitable about the expanding activities of her sister. She warned Golda that she must grasp her happiness and hold on to it tight. Later she told her that "the only thing I heartily wish you is that you should not try to be what you ought to be but what you are. If everybody would only be what they are, we would have a much finer world".<sup>16</sup> It could be that Sheina now wanted to emulate her younger sister, once her protégé and disciple, who was now embarking on an unknown journey as the leader of her group. After all, Golda was fulfilling the dream of immigrating to Palestine which she had first heard from Sheina. It might have been better if Golda had gone to Palestine without her sister, but she could hardly disagree with the idea. It was decided that Sheina and her children would travel with Golda while Shamai would remain behind to make some money and help his family in their first steps in Palestine.

And so, in April 1921, Golda and Sheina bid a tearful farewell to their parents and younger sister at the Milwaukee station. Golda recalled her father shedding bitter tears, her mother withdrawn. The elder Maboviches understood that once again Golda had things her way and had won. She left home, married the man she chose, insisted on making her own life and world and managed to bring about a total change of her place in the family. And now she was about to fulfill her greatest dream—to immigrate to Palestine, a country that to her parents and many friends seemed to be at the end of the universe. How dare she leave the "Goldene Medina" that had so much to offer and travel to a godforsaken country, dragging in tow an unwilling husband who was not convinced that she had made the right decision. He now realized that the Zionist bug was deeply ingrained in her and it was not a passing fad.

And now, fifteen years after arriving in Milwaukee as an emigrant child from Russia, she was leaving America, convinced of the justness of her choice. No one forced her to go. The decision was entirely hers and she never regretted it. She also understood that whatever happened to them in Palestine, she would bear the sole responsibility for her decision; Morris just went along with her with

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<sup>16</sup> Quoted in Syrkin, *Woman with a Cause*, p. 54.

little zeal. What did America mean to her? In her memoirs and in speeches and interviews given years later, she rarely mentioned the meaning of America to her growth and development, perhaps because she really did not know America apart from the Milwaukee Jewish ghetto and high school. Her entire life revolved around Jews, her thought focused on the future of the Jewish people. She had no gentile friends and never mentioned reading the local Milwaukee media. She did not mention the 1916 or 1920 presidential election campaigns or local elections, nor do we know if she ever voted. Growing up in Wisconsin, she must have been aware of the great political figure from that state—Senator Robert La Follette. For her America meant the end of the pogroms, the terror against Jews. In 1972, in a rare moment of introspection and much idealization, she told the Italian journalist Oriana Fallaci:

I grew up in America because in America I went to school and lived there until I was almost twenty. Because...well, because in America I lost my terror of Pinsk, of Kiev. How can I explain the difference for me between America and Russia? Look, when we arrived I was a little more than an eight-year-old girl, my elder sister was seventeen and my younger one four-and-a-half. My father was working and belonged to a union. He was very proud of his union and two months later, on Labor Day, he said to my mother: 'today there is a parade. If you all come to corner of such and such street, you'll see me marching with my union'. My mother took us along and while we were waiting for the parade, along came the mounted police to clear the path for the marchers—do you see? But my little four-and-a-half-year-old sister couldn't know that and when she saw the police on horseback she began to cry and to tremble, "the Cossaks, the Cossaks". We had to take her away without giving my father the satisfaction of seeing him marching with his union. She stayed in bed for days with a high fever, repeating "the Cossaks, the Cossaks". So look, the America I knew is a place where a man on a horseback protects a parade of workers, the Russia I knew is a place where men on horseback massacre Jews and young Socialists.

She then added this significant part of the interview:

Oh listen, America is a great country. It has many faults, many social inequalities, and it's a tragedy that the Negro problem wasn't resolved fifty or a hundred years ago, but it's still a great country, a country full of opportunity, of freedom. Does it seem to you nothing to be able to say what you like, to write what you like, even against the government, the establishment? Maybe I'm not objective, but for America I feel such a gratitude. I am fond of America, OK.<sup>17</sup>

In her own memoirs she devoted only few lines to what America meant to her: freedom, vast opportunities offered to an individual in a true democracy. She carried with her a permanent nostalgia for the green American countryside, the

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<sup>17</sup> Oriana Fallaci, *Interview with History*, New York, 1976, pp. 111–112.

lakes and forests of Wisconsin. She liked America but in future years she never had any feeling of homesickness or regrets for having chosen Palestine. Perhaps in later years she felt, had she stayed she would never have been able to play a central role in the creation of Israel, and her political work would have been confined to the restricted arena of Jewish politics without being able to make any impact on the national, let alone the international scene. She was convinced that her decision to leave America was the right personal choice for her, but she underestimated that in the process she sacrificed her marriage. By then another trait in her emerged—her ambition to be somebody in her own right.

On May 23, 1921 the small group boarded the S.S. Pocohantes and started their journey. An old, leaky and unsafe vessel, the Pocohantes also had a mutinous crew who were underpaid and treated the passengers with contempt, verging on torture. It took them seven days to limp to Boston for repairs, and they lost some of their colleagues who felt the effort was not worthwhile. The rest set sail across the Atlantic. In the middle of the ocean, the engines failed and the ship docked in Ponte Delgade in the Azores for additional repairs. They finally arrived in Naples and spent five days recovering from their ordeal at the Imperial Hotel. An overnight train brought them to the Italian port of Brindisi where they boarded another ship for Alexandria. The voyage was less dramatic and took three days to accomplish. Arriving in Egypt in the terrible mid-July heat, they took the train to Cairo and then connected with the overnight train to Palestine. There was, naturally, no water on the train and the passengers were suffering from heat, exhaustion and fear of what the next day would bring.<sup>18</sup>

In the town of Kantara on the Suez Canal, they encountered a young British Jew, Nathan Mindel, who served as a junior official in the Palestine Mandate Department of Immigration. He tried to persuade them to return to America. “It’s not for you, he said”. Nevertheless, a week later he signed a certificate both in English and in Hebrew certifying that on this day Golda Meyerson registered under paragraph 7 of the Immigration Ordinance. Forty years later, at a reunion for the members of the “Pocohantes” group, held in the residence of Foreign Minister Golda Meir, she reminded him of his advice. He had to admit that he had been “somewhat” wrong in his assessment of their prospects in the Promised Land. On the eastern bank of the Suez Canal there was another two-hour wait. Finally, they boarded the train for Palestine which made its way slowly through the Sinai Peninsula, along the coastal route to El-Arish, Raffiah and Gaza. A sandstorm

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**18** On the trip to Palestine see Korngold, *Memories*, pp. 125–145; see also Sheine Korngold, “The Pocohantes Journey”, in Yehuda Eerez, ed., *The Third Aliyah Book*, Tel Aviv, 1964, pp. 208–212; Meir, *My Life*, pp. 52–55, and Syrkin, *Woman with a Cause*, pp. 58–64.

that blew that night made the crying babies, noisy Arab passengers and baying animals that more eerie. Golda felt they would never reach their destination.

Since they were not traveling in an organized Zionist group but as individuals, and since Poalei Zion in Palestine had no advance notice of their impending arrival, they were not met when they finally disembarked, on July 14, 1921, bleary-eyed at the dusty train station in Tel Aviv that consisted of one hut. Apart from her immigrant certificate issued on July 29, 1921, there is no official record of their arrival in British or Zionist documentation. An attempt to find their names in Mandatory and Zionist archives failed to find any trace of them. Ironically, there is no record of the future prime minister of Israel arriving in the country she would lead fifty years later. Once in Tel Aviv, Regina's first husband, Yossel, said: "We've had our fun, now let's go back to America". They picked up their meager belongings and made their way to the Barash hotel, literally a flea-infested inn. The next day they went house hunting and found a tiny flat in Neve Zedek, on the Tel-Aviv-Jaffa border. They had no beds and had to sleep on their suitcases; the kitchen was outside the flat, as was the toilet.

All this did not deter Golda, but made Morris even more gloomy and despondent.

This country would be Golda's home until she died fifty-seven years later. She fulfilled her dream. She proved that she was made of steel and would not allow obstacles to divert her from attaining her goals. This land would be the place she helped turn into a garden, the garden she would nurture on the road to independence, the country she would lead years later.

### 3 Merhavia (1921–1925)

Almost from the moment she set foot in dusty, hot and humid Tel Aviv, Golda was determined to leave the cluster of small yellow buildings, unpaved streets and sand dunes that tried to pass as the world's "first Hebrew city", and fulfill her dream of living on a kibbutz. She jokingly echoed the general feeling that instead of milk and honey there was plenty of sand. She had a vague idea of what life on a kibbutz would be like, how it was organized and functioned. What she knew was more of a myth than the harsh reality, but enough to convince her that this should be the life for a young and idealistic couple.

Perhaps one of the main errors committed by Golda and her group was to immigrate to Palestine without even seeking the moral, organizational and mainly financial backing of a large social and political body. Since they came on their own, nobody felt any moral obligation to look after their needs, offer assistance and suggest job and housing possibilities in the new country. Golda and her friends were not aware of the fact that they were part of what became known as the Third Aliyah (wave of immigration to Palestine) which started in 1919 and ended in the mid 1920's. They followed in the footsteps of the Second Aliyah (1904–1914), whose members were the founding fathers of Israel, men who would play a key role in Golda's future work and private life. Among them were David Ben-Gurion, Berl Katznelson, David Remez and Zalman Shazar. By the time she arrived, they were instrumental in establishing a labor party, a federation of trade unions (Histadrut), an underground defense organization (Haganah), and a number of kibbutzim and moshavim. Although the Jewish community numbered less than 90,000 souls, it already had a number of governing bodies such as the Elected Assembly and the National Council that ran its affairs. The World Zionist Organization was represented by the Zionist Commission whose offices were in Jerusalem and they dealt mainly with the newly created Mandatory government. Golda was a quick learner and rapidly grasped the new realities of the country.

Meanwhile, Morris reported to his mother that Golda was giving English lessons because of great demand, and was being paid 3 to 4 Egyptian pounds a month, a respectable sum equivalent to 50 dollars. He found work in a store in Tel Aviv and later in a British-owned store in Lod, ten miles east of Tel Aviv, earning a weekly salary of 3.25 pounds that also included per diem as he was spending most of the week in Lod, joining Golda in Tel Aviv on weekends. Sheina and her children were supported by Shamai who sent them 100 dollars a month. They all lived in a two-room apartment, with rudimentary furniture and waited for their trunks to arrive.<sup>1</sup>

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1 Erez, ed., *The Third Aliyah Book*, Vol. I, pp. 237–238.



Golda herself sent a detailed report to Shamai written on August 24, 1921, in which she for the first time analyzed the political situation in the country. She knew that in April 1921 Palestinian Arabs had launched major riots against Jews in Jerusalem and Jaffa, killing a number of people and destroying property. The Arabs were once again signaling to the British authorities that they would never come to terms with the Balfour Declaration or the British Mandate which was to implement the declaration and help the Jews build a national homeland for themselves. The Arabs were insistent that Jewish immigration be stopped, Jews should not be allowed to purchase land and the Balfour Declaration and the entire Mandate system must be cancelled. Later they demanded immediate independence with majority rule. This meant that the tiny Jewish community (known as the Yishuv) would have to fall back on British protection as it started creating the infrastructure for the future Jewish state. In her letter, Golda noted:

Shortly after the pogrom (1921 riots), the Arabs were great heroes, but now *chalutzim* (pioneers) are again arriving regularly. But as I said, not one of us can foretell the future...There is only one way: he who is a Zionist, he who cannot rest in the Galut (Diaspora) must come here, but he must be ready for anything. Economic conditions have gotten worse since the pogrom, but even for the brief while that we are here, we can already see some improvement. All say that last winter was a boom and everything would have been marvelous if not for the riots. Another fact is important for me. Those who talk about returning (to America) are recent arrivals. An old worker is full of inspiration and faith. I say that as long as those who created the little that is here, are here. I cannot leave and you must come. I would not say this. I did not know that you are ready to work hard. True, even hard work is difficult to find, but I have no doubt that you will find something. Of course, this is not America, and one may have to suffer economically. There may even be pogroms again, but if one wants one's own land, and if one wants it with one's whole heart, one must be ready for this.<sup>2</sup>

It can be assumed that this paragraph reflected bitter arguments with Morris who already demanded that they return to America. For her, going back to the United States would have been an admission of failure. She had to justify the reason for immigrating to Palestine and was determined to stay despite the difficulties. To achieve one's goals one had to be stubborn and have steely convictions. These traits she possessed. In another part of the letter she attempted a political evaluation. In those early years she still trusted the British, but in retrospect, she misread their intentions:

First, the political situation. I am no politician and cannot exactly describe to you the politics of England. But one thing is clear to me. If we will not go away, then England will help us.

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<sup>2</sup> Letter quoted in Nachman Tamir, ed., *Golda—A Compendium in her Memory*, Tel Aviv, 1981, pp. 107–108.

True, one feels the English Government quite heavily in the country but this does not frighten me. England will not choose the Arabs over us to colonize Palestine.

Almost since the day they arrived, Golda began to plan their move to a kibbutz. She had not come all the way to Palestine to live a drab, dull life in Tel Aviv. She was already a seasoned campaigner for the Poalei Zion movement in America, an experienced organizer, speaker and fundraiser. It was unthinkable that in the land of her dreams, she would be reduced to giving English lessons to children of wealthy Tel Aviv families. She made inquiries how to go about joining a kibbutz. Morris did not show any interest in the project. In fact, he disliked the idea from the very beginning when she had first raised it in Denver. But apparently he did not put up a major fight, hoping that she would outgrow this fad. The tragedy that followed was all of Golda's making. She chose Merhavia, a place she knew little about. Had she checked more carefully, she would have discovered that Merhavia, like most communal settlements that survived World War I, was in poor shape, economically and socially.

Founded in 1911, and situated in the heart of the Valley of Jezreel, Merhavia was initially an experiment in cooperative agriculture developed by the German Jewish sociologist Professor Franz Oppenheimer. In 1909 he proposed the creation of an agricultural farm in Palestine to be administered by a professional agronomist. The members would be paid a monthly salary and would also receive part of the community's profits according to their particular expertise and productivity. Once the farm would be self-supporting, argued Oppenheimer, its members would manage it. The idea was aimed at providing an answer for the need of modern Jewish agriculture but one that had to take into account the lack of any significant experience in this field. Many similar ventures failed before 1914. In 1919, there was a renewed attempt to revive the cooperative settlement by a number of recently demobilized American Jewish members of the Jewish Legion who remained in Palestine. In that year, there were 23 settlers in Merhavia (15 men and 8 women) who, with the help of some hired hands, cultivated 129 acres of barley, 20 acres of fruit trees and 11 acres of vegetables. They also operated a barn and chicken coop and sold their dairy products to nearby towns and other villages. But the system of permanent as opposed to transient members was bound to create problems. The general atmosphere was grim, one of claustrophobia typical of small closed groups. This arrangement did not last long. In 1921, 20 ex-legionnaires settled in Merhavia, most of them members of Poalei Zion in America, who at least shared a similar ideological background.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> For the history of Merhavia, see Yehuda Erez, *The Merhavia Book*, Tel Aviv, 1964.

Golda heard about Merhavia from word of mouth and was probably influenced by the fact that several members were, like herself, Eastern European Jews who had lived in America for a while and then immigrated to Palestine for ideological reasons. When Golda and Morris arrived in September 1921, there were 35 settler-members in the cooperative. The overall budget came from the World Zionist Organization and under an agreement with that body, half of the profits would go to Keren Hayesod (the Foundation Fund, which was the fundraising arm of the World Zionist Organization) and half to the members. Initially a farm manager, later a committee of three elected members ran the cooperative. In 1921 Merhavia was valued at 3,500 Egyptian pounds, equivalent to US\$ 14,000.<sup>4</sup>

The main problems were social. As Merhavia was experiencing economic difficulties, it was reflected in the social fabric. There was a growing turnover in members, many leaving and fewer replacing them. There was not much social cohesion, instead a lot of arguments and bickering. In this tense atmosphere, the majority of the members were unmarried, and not prone to accept married couples. For various reasons they also did not want additional “Americans”, certainly not ones who came on their own, unsupported by a movement. Golda did not know of all this but was determined to make a go of this new phase in her life.

Having chosen her kibbutz, she set out to campaign for admission. In her memoirs she admits that she and Morris knew very little of Merhavia but they had a friend, an American who served in the Jewish Legion, who was a member. Golda assumed that since most of the members had a similar background like hers, English and Yiddish speakers, this could be an ideal place. When resistance developed, she fought it. The objections were mainly about how the Meyersons would fit into the harsh life in Merhavia, with the stifling heat in the summer and chill of winter, would they be able to resist malaria, did they have the physical stamina and determination. A married couple was bound to have babies that would require attention and manpower unavailable at the time. Therefore, the initial reaction to Golda’s request for joining was negative with no specific reasons given. Traveling back and forth between Tel Aviv and Merhavia, Golda had to use all her persuasive powers to convince the members she and Morris were the right candidates.

No documentation describing discussions over the admission of the Meyer-sons to membership exists. It seems that some members were impressed with Golda’s zeal and personality and above all her determination to be admitted. They were probably far less impressed by Morris’s reticence and his views on what his wife was planning for them. Golda realized that failure to be admitted

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid. See also Gilboa, “First Steps”, pp. 28–33.

to Merhavia would mean that no other kibbutz would admit them, forcing them to return to Tel Aviv, to be close to Sheina, or even worse, to return to America. For reasons she does not explain in her memoirs, she was “locked” on Merhavia and did not consider other, less problematic, places. However, she was determined to contribute her share to the building of the new nation and society in a manner that suited her socialist ideology. In September 1921, she wrote: “We won the battle”. She may have won this battle but certainly lost the bigger war—her marriage.<sup>5</sup>

Golda and Morris were admitted on probation and became full members a few months later. The kibbutz’s meticulously kept financial records show the Meyersons earning 25 Egyptian pounds a month (Morris 19 and Golda 6). Their expenses were minimal. Golda bought some yards of white cloth and sewed her own dresses and a hat for 80 piasters and a pair of sandals for 3 pounds 10 piasters. In 1922, the kibbutz supplied Golda with additional five yards of cloth while Morris received two pairs of shoes, shoe laces, shoe polish, six pairs of socks and towels. Fifty-five years later, in 1977, the kibbutz finally closed the Meyerson’s account, issuing Golda a check for 1,685 Israel pounds (equivalent to one dollar sixty cents). While the kibbutz owed Morris (dead since 1951) 2,305 pounds, Golda was in debt by 52 piasters. There is no evidence how Golda reacted to the closing of this chapter in her life.<sup>6</sup>

In her final years, Golda repeatedly attempted to create the impression that these were the best years of her life and had circumstances permitted, she would have remained in Merhavia for the rest of her life. But the reality was different. In one of her more honest and frank interviews, given to the Italian journalist Oriana Fallaci in 1972, she blamed Morris for forcing her to leave Merhavia. “For him I made the biggest sacrifice of my life: I left the kibbutz. You see, there was nothing I loved so much as the kibbutz. I liked everything about it—the manual work, the comradeship, the discomforts”, but, she continued, “he could not stand it, neither psychologically nor physically”.<sup>7</sup> It can safely be argued that in spite of this nostalgic description, she also did not feel fully at home in Merhavia. In her own account of this period and in later interviews, she did not mention people from Merhavia by name. In his book about his mother, Menachem Meir devotes less than two pages to this crucial time, and writes: “that although neither she

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5 Meir, *My Life*, p. 63.

6 The details appear in documents pertaining to her stay in the kibbutz archive. See also Syrkin, *Woman with a Cause*, pp. 69–83; Golda Meir, “How I made it in my Kibbutz”, in Marie Syrkin, ed., *Golda Meir Speaks Out*, London, 1973, pp. 38–42. See also Goldstein, *Golda*, pp. 36–62.

7 Fallaci, Interview, p. 115.

nor my father ever told us this”—and Golda confirmed in her own “My Life”—, “their relationship underwent its first crisis in kibbutz Merhavia”.<sup>8</sup>

At first both seemed to have been content, Morris even happy. Marie Syrkin and Menachem Meir cite from letters written by Morris to his mother in America describing the Valley of Jezreel in its splendor in the winter and spring of 1922. But the idyll soon soured. Golda began to organize things. A restless woman, she also insisted on cleanliness, tidyness and sanitary care, she was a demon for order and punctuality and hated sloppy work. She apparently began to boss people around and this was resented, mainly by the women of Merhavia. They also resented Golda’s good looks, her charm, conviviality and sociability, her endless drive and ambition, her readiness and willingness to undertake any job and perform it thoroughly.

Syrkin quotes a former woman member of Merhavia who told her that on a rainy day in the kitchen, some women were shelling almonds because nothing else could be done. “Golda sat looking a bit regal, as always, telling us things...”<sup>9</sup> In “My Life” Golda retorted: “Of course there were people at Merhavia to whom I found it difficult to adjust, particularly to some of the ‘veteran’ women who regarded themselves as entitled to lay down the law on how one should or should not behave on the kibbutz”.<sup>10</sup> Morris and some of the women resented another one of Golda’s habits: “sharing a midnight snack with the boys coming back from guard duty and staying in the kitchen for hours to hear their stories”. Morris wanted to be with his wife, the others wanted their men at home and not in the kibbutz kitchen with Golda.

Within a few weeks, serious problems erupted between Golda and Morris. She described them in her 1972 interview with Oriana Fallaci: “he couldn’t stand eating at the communal table with the rest of us. He couldn’t stand the hard work. He couldn’t stand the climate and the feeling of being part of the community. He was too individualistic, too introverted, too delicate. He got sick...”<sup>11</sup> She did not explain the nature of his illness. It can be assumed that he sunk into a depression. She was the exact opposite. After work, she hated the idea of being cooped up in their room with Morris. Radio was not yet available, but they had a phonograph on which Morris constantly played his beloved records of classical music. There were hardly any books in Merhavia. Increasingly Golda felt she was trapped and, worse, bored. Being by nature a restless woman, always busy doing things, she found it hard to accept the fact that life in a kibbutz was basically slow and dull.

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<sup>8</sup> Meir, *My Mother Golda Meir*, pp. 14–15.

<sup>9</sup> Syrkin, *Woman with a Cause*, p. 81.

<sup>10</sup> Meir, *My Life*, p. 69.

<sup>11</sup> Fallaci, *Interview*, pp. 115–116.

She craved for more. She needed to find immediate solutions to her two main problems: a despondent husband and how to occupy her own spare time. Her solution was to throw herself into the kibbutz life and work and become more involved in what was happening in the kibbutz and outside of Merhavia, too. Soon she was sent to an agricultural school for a few weeks to study modern poultry raising methods so that she would be able to set up and manage Merhavia's modern chicken-coop as an additional source of income. She was elected to the kibbutz's management committee and was soon serving on its steering committee. Wherever she was and in whatever organization she served, Golda was driven by ambition to reach the top post. But Merhavia, she soon discovered, was too small and confined for her long-term goals, so she sought broader horizons.

Her chance came in early 1923 when she represented Merhavia at a convention of the kibbutz movement held in the “mother of the kibbutzim” Degania (established in 1909). There, for the first time she met the leaders of the Yishuv's (Jewish Community of Palestine) labor movement, men with whom she would be working for the next five decades as they were leading the community towards statehood. Among them was David Ben-Gurion whom she had briefly met in Milwaukee in 1916. At 36, he was one of the leaders of the Achdut Ha'avodah (Unity of Labor) socialist party he helped found in 1908. He was also the Secretary General of the Histadrut, whose membership now stood at 8,394, or 10 % of the Jewish community. He was already recognized as the rising star of the labor movement—the doer, motivator, organizer, mobilizer, planner, orator, writer and visionary. A dedicated, impassioned, often tyrannical personality, he was determined to ensure that in the future Jewish state, the Labor Movement would be dominant. But until such time, there would be the need for the slow, evolutionary process of laying the foundations for the future state. He was then busy creating the institutional infrastructure and envisioned Labor power based on two pillars: the Achdut Ha'avodah party and the Histadrut. Both would get financial support from the World Zionist Organization. But in the meantime, they would have to create their own economic power base which would include kibbutzim, moshavim and other economic and industrial enterprises. This base would ensure their survival and their ability to absorb new immigrants and provide them with their basic needs—housing, education, medical aid and employment. The laying of the organizational and economic infrastructures for the Labor Movement may not have been pure socialism. But it was the fulfillment of Zionism. It was also the only thing this small group could do at a time when their resources were virtually nonexistent and they relied heavily on subsidies from the World Zionist Organization, a body over which they had no control. During a brief visit to the Soviet Union in 1923, where he studied the Soviet Bolshevik doctrine, Ben-Gurion understood that at the root of political power lies control of economic institutions

and he set out to achieve this with vision, single-minded determination and on occasion with ruthlessness.

Another figure she met in Degania was Berl Katznelson, the guide and mentor of the movement, its ideologist and uncrowned spiritual leader. He was a man of vast sensitivity, and although self-taught, he was possessed of encyclopedic knowledge, gentle and caring, he was the light and soul of the movement. Less concerned with matters of tactics and organization, he was the strategist and the thinker. He had already won the admiration of the movement's members in Palestine and was making his name in Jewish communities abroad.

In Degania Golda also met David Remez. Born in Russia in 1886, he too joined Poalei Zion in that country at an early age. In 1911, he went to Istanbul to study law. In 1913, he settled in Palestine and began his public career as an agricultural worker. He slowly rose in the ranks of the Labor Movement and in 1920 was among the founders of the Histadrut. A year later he was appointed head of the Public Works Office of the Histadrut, designed to provide work for newly arrived immigrants. Remez was an intellectual, writer and orator, but also a doer. Wise and shrewd, stable and tough, fluent in a number of languages, he spoke Hebrew better than most and coined many new words in that language. He, more than anyone else, would play a major role in shaping Golda's mind and future growth in the movement. Although both married, they would also be romantically linked for many years. He would be instrumental in promoting her to leadership positions in the Histadrut, the Labor Movement and later in various state institutions. He was her guide, mentor, tutor and lover.

Another leader she met was Zalman Shazar (Rubashov), a scholarly socialist born in Russia in 1889, he first visited Palestine in 1911, later studied in Germany and was fluent in five languages. At home with the classics as well as the Jewish tradition, he would also exert much influence on Golda's then impressionable mind. They, too, would become romantically attached. Another participant in that conference was Levi Eshkol, born in Russia in 1894. He immigrated to Palestine in 1914, joined the Jewish Legion and after the war settled in kibbutz Degania. He already had the reputation of a man who could get things done.

These five men were among the top echelon of the Achdut Ha'avodah/Histadrut leadership. They were all born in Russia, joined Poalei Zion at a young age, and immigrated to Palestine as part of the Second Aliyah. The party numbered less than 3000 members, but it was, according to Berl Katznelson's biographer, "a sort of an extended family—everybody knew each other, personal loyalty and comradeship characterized the relationship among its members". All accepted the authority of the Second Aliyah leaders who were renowned for their intellectual level, the strength of their personalities and convictions, as well as for their ideological fervor. But they were also pragmatic and practical and never fanatic

as they systematically and methodically went about building their institutions and control over the Yishuv.<sup>12</sup>

Golda craved to be part of that group. Feeling trapped in Merhavia, her marriage already shaky, she needed support and looked for a strong father figure that she hoped Morris would supply, but he was unable to do so. He was too wrapped up in his own despondency, too dependent on Golda. As these leaders became sort of mentors and father figures to her, she felt she owed them loyalty and service; for their part they guided and assured her that she was doing the right thing. They were also the ticket for future advancement in the ranks. She sought and won their approval as she stood on the threshold of her public life in the country.

The Degania convention, barely mentioned in the annals of the Labor Movement, was recalled by Golda as a turning point in her life. She loved conventions, but this one was different. The agenda included discussions on how to improve life on the kibbutz while maintaining its pristine and austere atmosphere; how to obtain greater yields and how to attract new members. A detailed description of this gathering was provided by Yehuda Sharett in a long letter to his brother Moshe Sharett who was then a student in London. He described how Golda was dressed, her good looks, her speech (in Yiddish) and her demeanor. Above all, he wrote about how she was able to charm and impress so many of the leaders. At 24, barely speaking Hebrew, Golda mostly listened, learned and made new friends. She apparently impressed them with her good looks and zeal, and that she immigrated to Palestine from America for purely Zionist reasons. When she got back to Merhavia, she wrote that she “could hardly wait to tell Morris everything that had been said and done”. This was probably the last thing he was interested in. He may have understood that new doors were opening up for Golda, new friendships made and new ideas filtering into her mind. Now his role in her life would be even more marginal. She was drifting away from him.

At the same time, while not working on the kibbutz, she became absorbed in another organization—Moetset Hapoalot—The Women’s Labor Council, a body dedicated to looking after the needs of the Jewish working women in Palestine. If the new reality was harsh for men, it was much sterner for women. They were normally the first to be subjected to unemployment, low wages and other forms of harassment and discrimination. Even in the kibbutzim they were relegated to the traditional roles of cooking, sewing, laundry and looking after babies. The married ones felt it was virtually impossible for them to have a family and still implement their Zionist and socialist ideals. In the kibbutzim there was a running

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<sup>12</sup> Anita Shapira, *Berl*, Tel Aviv, 1976, p. 271.



battle between those women who demanded they be assigned “male” roles and those who were resigned to the traditional jobs. Golda was not then, or in the future, concerned with women’s lib. In Merhavia she had already aroused the anger of some of the women when she said she saw nothing wrong with working in the kitchen.

In 1911, an educational agricultural farm for women had been established to teach immigrant women the basics of farming. In that year a number of women met to discuss the need to protect their special interests. On the eve of World War I, a national conference was held in Merhavia where 30 elected delegates representing some 200 women workers met. After the war, with the growing influx of immigrant women, there was a growing need for an organization that would cater to the requirements of pioneer women, single and married, living in towns and kibbutzim. Women also had to be trained in either farming or industry and mainly protected from exploitation and low wages. Working mothers demanded day care centers and insisted that they be treated as equals to men in the pioneering ethos of the time. Many women wanted to assert their rights and demanded they be allowed to fulfill their potential in building the new country and contributing to the social as well as the economic development of the Yishuv.

In 1920 Moetsset Hapoalot was founded as an affiliate of the Histadrut, headed by a tough, austere, dominant and stern spinster called Ada Maimon. She, too, came from a scholarly home in Eastern Europe that produced well-known rabbis and learned men. Her brother was one of the leaders of the Mizrachi religious party. The second convention of Moetsset Hapoalot was held in Haifa in 1922, attended by 37 delegates representing 600 women. One of them was Golda Meir.<sup>13</sup> The agenda included topics such as the role of women in kibbutzim and moshavim, children’s education, organizational issues and the perennial need for money to fund various projects. Golda was elected to the Council of this body with seven others, among them two of the better-known women leaders of the time: Mania Schochat and Rachel Yanait-Ben Zvi. This time Golda had something to say (in Yiddish). This was the first organization in which Golda became involved outside the kibbutz. She impressed her colleagues by her no-nonsense approach to solving problems, her manner of getting right to the point, of staying away from sterile and complicated ideological debates and seeking a pragmatic solution to the problem at hand.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Ada Maimon, *Along the Way*, Tel Aviv, 1972, p. 237.

<sup>14</sup> Ada Maimon, *Fifty Years of the Women’s Workers Movement*, Tel Aviv, 1958, pp. 233–234. See also Pinkas, October 1923, Vol. VI, Jerusalem, p. 187.

This growing extra-curricular activity made Morris more miserable. By mid-1922 he contracted malaria, which sapped his physical strength. His morale was in any case very low and he came to loath Merhavia with passion. His feelings of frustration were vented in letters to his family back in America. The earlier glowing descriptions of Merhavia were replaced by constant complaints. He realized that he was unable to control his wife, certainly unable to persuade her to return to Tel Aviv prior to returning to America, a move urged by his family. Physically ill, emotionally drained, he despaired of ever being able to change Golda's lifestyle and her priorities. To spite her, he refused to start a family, arguing that Merhavia was not an ideal place to raise children. In fact, it seemed to her like an ultimatum—if you want children, we must leave the kibbutz. He refused to share her with others and grew more despondent. Golda was already finding her niches in the kibbutz's steering committee, the Women's Labor Council, the party, the Histadrut. All this meant lengthy meetings and much travel away from the kibbutz while Morris was mired in Merhavia. Few members in the kibbutz had the time, interest, patience or the desire to share or let alone deal with his problems. Virtually none shared his love for music and books. He had become a liability and a burden.

In October 1922 rumors began to circulate that the Meyersons were leaving Merhavia. In a letter to a friend, Ada Maimon noted that “she knew nothing about Golda's leaving”. She then added, “it would have been good if Golda would live in Haifa for a while and look after things there for the Council”.<sup>15</sup> But Golda rejected the idea. She learned how to cope with her problems on her own and not share them with others save with her sister Sheina in Tel Aviv and Regina, by then remarried, living in Jerusalem, working as an English secretary for the Zionist Executive.

On December 15, 1922, Golda attended a meeting of the Women's Labor Council leadership in Tel Aviv discussing their participation and role in the forthcoming second Histadrut Convention due to be held in February 1923. “Golda as an American”, wrote Ada Maimon, “expressed her view that we would have to take certain steps and obtain means from America for the women's farms. She is fully confident that we could influence various women's organizations to allocate some of their funds for women in Palestine”.<sup>16</sup> The idea was not original. By 1922 Histadrut leaders had already gone to the United States to establish ties with the American trade union movement and mainly with Jewish Socialist groups and parties and initiate fundraising campaigns for the Histadrut. Golda

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<sup>15</sup> Maimon, *Fifty Years*, p. 239.

<sup>16</sup> Maimon, *Fifty Years*, p. 242.

was convinced that the American Jewish women's group Pioneer Women, linked with the Labor Movement in Palestine, would want to help the Council. This was the first time in which she spoke clearly of the need for American Jews to provide the means for the national enterprise in Palestine and to share the burden with the Yishuv. If they did not immigrate, at least let them give money and demonstrate their identification with and become partners in the creation of the new society and the future Jewish state. They should raise the funds, but have as little to say about how the money would be spent as possible. The decisions would be made by those on the spot. This conviction remained with her to her dying days. Eventually she became one of the outstanding fundraisers for Israel.

In early 1923, Golda's command of English, her poise, inner calm, dignity and ability to persuade others of her convictions came in handy. Mrs. Ethel Snowden, the wife of one of the British Labor Party leaders, visited Palestine and Golda was recruited by the party to guide her around the kibbutzim in the Valley of Jezreel. At first she refused the party's request, feeling that being a tour guide was demeaning. But she finally relented and spent several days touring with Mrs. Snowden, which she actually enjoyed. This visit and Golda's efforts were important enough to be mentioned by Ben-Gurion in a letter to a friend. Golda was soon asked to perform similar assignments, which meant more time away from Merhavia and Morris. The kibbutz was not too happy with her prolonged absences and some snide remarks were heard. At the time Merhavia was slowly inching towards social disintegration. There is not much information about if and how Golda attempted to stop the process. Maybe this state of affairs spurred her on to spend more time away from Merhavia and from the beleaguered Morris. He continued to pour his heart out in letters to America. Marie Syrkin quotes one such letter: "Ah, Palestine, Palestine, you beggarly little land, what will become of you? How ironic seem the fine words of Poalei Zion meetings about a free worker's Palestine".<sup>17</sup> His mother offered to send money for the couple to return to America. Golda rejected the idea out of hand. Morris never went back to the United States.

In February 1923, Golda attended the second Histadrut Convention in Haifa. This body now represented some 20,000 organized Jewish workers and began to exert much influence in the Yishuv. The second Convention was important: it ratified the Histadrut's constitution, decided to issue a daily newspaper, and voted to establish the Workers Company which incorporated the Histadrut's administrative, cooperative, communal, economic and industrial enterprises. The delegates also decided to unite with the Socialist International, create a Histadrut Tribunal,

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<sup>17</sup> Syrkin, *Woman with a Cause*, p. 82.

establish urban suburbs for urban workers and determine a salary scale for all Histadrut employees based on family size and needs. Golda made her maiden speech in Palestine. Speaking in Yiddish, she criticized “certain left-wing circles of Poalei Zion in the Diaspora who were disparaging our work here”. She referred to radical socialists in America who called for an immediate social revolution in Palestine prior to the attainment of Jewish independence in the future. They were not satisfied with the slow pace of creating a just, equal and progressive society. They wanted a revolution in a hurry while the Histadrut leadership, mindful of the conditions in Palestine, was first and foremost interested in entrenching the Histadrut’s place in the Yishuv and finding work for immigrants. The speech was typical of Golda. She was already telling American Jews not to criticize decisions made by the leadership in Palestine and always lend a hand.

The bulk of her speech was devoted to the Women’s Labor Council, whose work was crucial due to the lack of adequate conditions for women workers. She said that if the Histadrut were to create the right conditions, there would be no need for a separate women’s organ (“so that we shall no longer need a special institution and cancel it...”) Ada Maimon was not happy with the speech. No one wants to see her organization go out of existence and lose her power base. Ben-Gurion was impressed enough to mention Golda’s speech in his memoirs. In Haifa, Golda once again rubbed shoulders with Ben-Gurion, Remez, Katznelson, Shazar and the others, while back home Morris was nearing a breaking point. Upon her return to Merhavia, more bickering and arguments ensued. Years later Golda claimed that his health had deteriorated so rapidly and drastically that a doctor advised a change in climate. This meant leaving Merhavia before he became critically ill. Another account suggests a totally different reason: She became romantically involved with another man, older than she, who later practiced medicine in Tel Aviv. Morris demanded that they leave at once. She gave up and in early 1924 headed back to Tel Aviv, once again staying with Sheina.

Leaving the kibbutz left a permanent scar on Golda and she would in the future often discuss this shattering event. In her memoirs she simply wrote about Morris’s feelings:

But it never occurred to me that by sitting in the kitchen until all hours making snacks for the boys when they came off guard duty, or taking that poultry course, or spending so much time talking to and singing with other people, I was depriving Morris of anything. If I had thought deeply enough about our marriage or worried enough about it, I would have realized that of course, Morris was struggling all alone to get used to a way of life that was really immensely difficult for him.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Meir, *My Life*, p. 72.

This was a less honest explanation than the one she made to Fallaci. She probably began to grow tired of Morris's moods shortly after they came to Palestine. He was not a Zionist, did not believe in women's rights or letting Golda do her own thing. She insisted they immigrate to Palestine and did not work very hard to save the marriage which, in Syrkin's words, was "doomed". In America she may not have had an indication that Morris would be a burden on the fulfillment of her ambitions and would not be content to follow her around in the margins as she pursued a public career. He wanted a life on his own but was confronted by a much stronger personality who insisted on making her own life in her own way. Had she not run away from home at age 14? Was she not going to Palestine and escape an uncertain life in America? She did have romantic illusions about Palestine and little understanding of what life was like in that barren land and how it would impact her husband. But now, barely two years after coming to Palestine, as she was establishing a small name for herself in the right circles, making new and important friends in the right places, she had to deal with a sick and nagging husband. The situation was best analyzed by Marie Syrkin:

Perhaps life would have been kinder to both if either had possessed the strength to sever a relationship whose stresses were increased by each capitulation, but neither of the young couple had the strength for a clean break. The psychologically puzzling figure was Golda. The tormented and clinging love of Morris was self-explanatory, but why the strong-willed, vigorous girl lacked the courage to face the truth in her most vital personal relationship is less clear. To her affection for Morris was added a sense of guilt. On her account he had become deracinated and emotionally dependent. She was bound by his bondage, and the decision to leave Merhavia seemed inevitable under the circumstances.<sup>19</sup>

Did she ever consider a divorce? Fifty years later she was asked this question by Oriana Fallaci. Her answer was: "Oh, no. Never. Such an idea never entered my head, never. I've always gone on thinking of myself married to him".<sup>20</sup> She did not divorce partly because it was not done. It would have been an admission of a massive error, an admission that her parents might have been right all along that he was not the right man for her. Divorce would have been an ideal solution mainly because they did not yet have children. But Golda claimed she loved Morris intensely and did not even want to consider such an idea. Morris did not want a divorce, either. Both were afraid to be alone, Golda dependent once again on her sister and Morris probably doomed to return to America. Both were very selfish. They were systematically destroying each other but did not have the courage to take the drastic step. In fact, they decided to postpone

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<sup>19</sup> Syrkin, *Woman with a Cause*, p. 83.

<sup>20</sup> Fallaci, *Interview*, p. 116.

this decision for much later and in the meantime sought ways to mend the marriage.

Back in Tel Aviv, filled with remorse, she made a last-ditch effort to save her marriage by having a child. Living with Sheina again was misery. Golda and Morris barely communicated with each other. “We both felt very much at loose ends and were irritable most of the time”,<sup>21</sup> she wrote later. She found a job as a bookkeeper in the Tel Aviv branch of the Histadrut’s Public Works and Building Office headed by Remez. Morris stayed at home trying to get Merhavia out of his system. Golda was like a caged tigress—longing for the kibbutz and even more for public life. As she was no longer living in Merhavia, she could not represent the kibbutz in any party, Histadrut and kibbutz movement bodies. Working in a tiny dusty office in Tel Aviv, again living with her sister, she had a sense of terrible failure in all that she had tried to achieve in her life. She was barely 25.

It is hard to determine whether Golda, given her vast ambitions and natural restlessness, would have been content to spend the rest of her life on the kibbutz. Had she stayed, she probably would have ended up like the other leaders of the Labor Movement who maintained their residences in the kibbutz, but in fact worked and resided in Tel Aviv where the various organizations they created had their headquarters. To have a kibbutz address was important socially, ideologically and politically. Golda strenuously maintained that for Morris she made the biggest sacrifice of her life, forsaking the kibbutz. Later she spoke and wrote that she longed to live on a kibbutz again but circumstances prevented her from doing so. The truth is that she could have had her children and gone back to Merhavia or another kibbutz and stay there for the rest of her life. But she was not made for a kibbutz, for the dull routine and slow pace of life and for many years of drab kibbutz existence which marked these settlements in the 1920’s and 1930’s. The bitter Merhavia experience would haunt her for the rest of her life. She may have felt that by leaving Merhavia she betrayed an ideal. She was unable to control her destiny and had shown weakness. She feared that this experience would be symptomatic of her failure to make a go of it in Palestine. She felt the nagging fear that leaving Merhavia could be the first step of a possible return to the United States, an idea she abhorred.

In retrospect, her two-and-a-half years in Merhavia became for her, by design or by accident, a stepping stone for making a name for herself and establishing her presence. The kibbutz was, in fact, used by her as a sort of a power base, without her noticing it or admitting such a possibility. While she lived in Merhavia she knew she could be involved in public life with the knowledge that her

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<sup>21</sup> Meir, *My Life*, p. 73.

basic needs would be taken care of by the community. She did not have to worry about her livelihood—the kibbutz provided, albeit little, food and shelter so that she could absent herself to attend to party or Histadrut business without worrying who would provide food for Morris. As a kibbutz member she belonged, temporarily, to the pioneering elite, to those who really worked the land and not just talked about it.

No wonder that back in Tel Aviv, she felt “lost and directionless, away from Merhavia as though we were doomed to being transients forever”. By mid-1924 it was too late to make a major change in her life as she was expecting a child and may have hoped that this blessed event would revive her marriage. An opportunity to move away from Tel Aviv presented itself when she and Morris were offered positions in the Jerusalem office of the Public Works and Building Company. Another employee in the bookkeeping department was Rosa Cohen-Rabin, the mother of then two-year-old Yitzhak Rabin. It can be safely assumed that once again David Remez was the initiator of this move. The couple settled in the Nachlat Achim poor section in Jerusalem and waited for the arrival of their first child. Menachem was born on November 23, 1924 and occupied their time and energy. But the spark had gone out of their marriage. Golda could not work and look after the baby and decided to take the child back to Merhavia in 1925, leaving Morris in Jerusalem. This was not a wise decision. A lone mother with a baby was not welcomed by what remained of the disintegrating Merhavia community. Some members claimed that Merhavia was not a shelter for broken families and she was made to feel unwelcome. Golda was assigned to the baby home and learned something about child care. Years later, as Minister of Labor and Housing, she was able to give immigrant mothers some advice on how to raise their children. As the kibbutz fell apart, Golda decided to return to Jerusalem and try and be a good mother and a devoted wife.

In retrospect, Merhavia established her name, strengthened her character and honed her resolve and will power. These traits would serve her well in the next fifty years. She felt that even though she left the kibbutz, she was for a while a real pioneer, overcoming hardship and self-doubts. She demonstrated that she could be as tough as the men around her. She managed to get admitted to the kibbutz and in later years it became part of her biography. As Degania was Eshkol’s kibbutz, Sede Boker Ben-Gurion’s kibbutz in the 1950’s and 1960’s, so was Merhavia the “Founding Mother’s” kibbutz. Despite of the heartache and problems, she did have a soft spot for Merhavia and pleasant memories of the creation, the building, the struggle and the fulfillment. In later years she was given a small apartment in her daughter’s kibbutz Revivim and spent many weekends there, feeling that she once again belonged to a kibbutz. The following three years would once again test her mettle and character in ways she had never dreamed of.

## 4 Jerusalem (1925–1928)

Jerusalem would be Golda's home for the next three bitter years. She would remember this period in her life as the most trying and difficult. These were years of physical, material and spiritual deprivation, of loneliness and uncertainty. Only her strong personality and determination allowed her to endure life in Jerusalem without caving in. But those years left her with searing scars. Some never healed. Formally she was married to Morris, who was employed in Solel Boneh, the name given to the construction company set up by the Hisatdrut, and earning eight pounds a month, a decent salary by the standards of the time. But he was not paid in cash but in vouchers that you could not use to pay the grocer or the landlord. They lived in a two-room apartment in the poor Jerusalem neighborhood Yegiah Kapaim (literally “manual labor”), this name aptly fit their situation. Golda was also employed part-time in Solel Boneh's Jerusalem's office. In May 1926 another child, Sarah, was born and Golda now had to raise two small babies. Her letters from those years show a lonely woman grappling with the daily hardship of feeding two infants in the either bitterly cold Jerusalem winter or the stifling heat of summer. One room was rented out to supplement their income and help pay for Menachem's nursery school. She earned extra money by doing his kindergarten laundry which helped defray the tuition costs. Sheina and Shamai often sent food parcels. But all this could not help her overcome the gnawing feeling that she was wasting her time as she attempted to survive physically. Having tested the heady wine of politics in the United States prior to coming to Palestine, and then the occasional excitement of politics while she lived in Merhavia, she now felt isolated and out of touch with what was happening, cut off from her former friends, and above all she resented the fact that she could not fulfill her ambitions and do something more meaningful for her party, the movement and the Yishuv, stuck in a Jerusalem slum.

She made no effort to establish new relationships and acquaintances in Jerusalem. She did renew the old friendship with Regina who often lent moral and on occasion material support. The poor struggling Meyerson family did not fit in with the Jerusalem social scene which consisted of wealthy Sephardi Jewish families who had lived in the city for generations. Golda was not interested in the newly created Mandatory officialdom even though she could speak to them in English. There remained the budding Zionist hierarchy to which Regina and her new husband belonged. She had no contact with the faculty of the recently opened Hebrew University and of course had no common language with the large ultra-Orthodox Jewish community. At the fringe of society, she experienced a daily sense of frustration verging on despair. This was totally different from what she hoped and dreamed. Even her frequent visits to Sheina in Tel Aviv did not



improve her mood. Morris's family kept asking that they return to America. She would hear nothing of it. Her letters speak mainly of the daily battle to obtain food, milk, heating in winter and how to swat flies in summer. She recalled these times as one of constant struggle:

There was also my loneliness, the sense of isolation to which I was so unaccustomed and the constant feeling that I was being deprived of just those things for which I had come to Palestine in the first place. Instead of actively helping build a Jewish national home and working hard and productively for it, I found myself cooped up in a tiny apartment in Jerusalem, all my thoughts and energy concentrated on making do with Morris's wages.<sup>1</sup>

The occasional trips to Tel Aviv to see her family and friends and escape the stifling atmosphere of Jerusalem apparently charged her spent emotional and political batteries. There she could talk about things that interested her, pick up the latest gossip and learn of new developments. Officially she was still a member of the Executive Council of the Histadrut and in that capacity she made a speech, on May 14, 1925, representing the Women's Labor Council. The discussion focused on the dismal situation of Solel Boneh and the growing unemployment among Jewish immigrants. Golda argued that if the Histadrut fundraising campaign in America promised \$30,000, "there is no basis to believe that it will raise 30,000 or even 10,000 dollars". She thought that all the income should go to Solel Boneh. "Our comrades in America will understand us. We must only explain this to them. I am convinced that if we do so, they will understand our decision".<sup>2</sup> Once again, the simple logic—if you explain something well, it will be understood and acted upon. She preferred to ignore other factors and relied on her powers of conviction and persuasion.

In 1925 she was appointed to a panel created to resolve the argument between the veterans of the old Hashomer (Watchman) organization, who were the official defense organization of the Jewish community under the Turks, and the Hagannah defense organization established by the Histadrut in 1920. She and her co-panelists Zalman Shazar and Zeev Shefer ruled that the old organization formally ceased to exist when the Hagannah was created. In fact, they said, the Hashomer had become an integral part of the Hagannah. This was a purely political decision designed to bolster the standing of the Histadrut in the Hagannah and to ensure that there would be no competing underground defense

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<sup>1</sup> Meir, *My Life*, p. 76.

<sup>2</sup> Protocols of the Secretariat of the Va'ad Hapoel, 14 May 1925, p. 158

organizations in the Yishuv. Golda was pleased to be once again involved in Histadrut matters.<sup>3</sup>

She showed renewed interest in her party, Achdut Ha'avodah, which in 1925 numbered some 3,000 active members led by Ben-Gurion, then serving as Secretary General of the Histadrut, David Remez, the head of Solel Boneh and Golda's mentor, Avraham Hartsfeld who headed the Agricultural Association, and Berl Katznelson, now the editor of the Histadrut's new daily newspaper "Davar". The historian of this epoch noted that the party was in fact a large family: everyone knew everyone else and relations were based on loyalty to leaders and on comradeship. The second echelon of the party's leaders included some who already grew up in the country, having come at an early age. Among them was Moshe Sharett (Shertok) and his two brothers-in-law, Elyahu Golomb who commanded the Hagannah and Dov Hoz, another key Hagannah leader. There was another brother-in-law, Shaul Avigur, who would after World War II head the effort to bring illegal immigrants to the shores of Palestine and purchase arms for the defense of the Yishuv and later Israel. Chronologically Golda belonged to the Third Aliyah and to that group, but as she was not yet recognized as part of it, she later expressed her appreciation of this group:

The Third Aliyah did not contribute anything new to the foundations of the movement. Hebrew labor, Hebrew defense, the existence of the people who were willing to receive it and the Hebrew language, collective life, return to the soil, yearning, even subconsciously, for unity of the Labor Movement—these were values bequeathed to us by the people of the Second Aliyah. But the importance of the event of the Giving of the Law is double: A. The very granting of this law; B. and no less important, and preserve the law. I imagine that the main significance of the Third Aliyah was in accepting this law, which was handed to it by the comrades of the Second Aliyah. We accepted it with full heart and with happiness and abided by its rulings. When we came to this land people were given the chance to obtain work and do it with our own hands, and in the same spirit that we carried it out then. This was the most vital and precious thing for us.<sup>4</sup>

While these thoughts were written much later, Golda knew her place in the scheme of things even then and realized there was a hierarchy and that seniority and the leaders had to be respected and obeyed. Not only were they leaders of a political party, but above all they were also leaders of a national—ideological, spiritual and economic enterprise—engaged in laying the foundations for the future

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<sup>3</sup> David Ben-Gurion, *Letters*, Vol. II, Tel Aviv, 1972, pp. 343–346; *History of the Hagannah*, Vol. II, Part I, Tel Aviv, 1977, p. 232.

<sup>4</sup> *Book of the Third Aliyah*, Vol. II, p. 910.

Jewish state. She effaced herself before these leaders, whom she admired also for their oratorical, debating and writing skills in Hebrew, Russian and Yiddish. In those days she was also moved by the concern of some of the leaders to her welfare. The great Berl Katznelson even sent a note to a friend saying: “I received a letter from Golda. Things are not good for her and she is lonely”.<sup>5</sup>

Even the arrival of her parents in 1926 did not seem to cheer her up. Her father purchased a plot of land in Herzliyah, north of Tel Aviv, but his economic situation was far from adequate. Only when they arrived in Palestine did Golda’s parents learn the harsh reality in which she lived, something she had successfully hidden from them in her cheerful letters. There was not much they could do to help her apart from offering solace, comfort and being grandparents to her children. Now there was another address she could turn to in addition to her sister who by then was also temporarily alone. Shamai had gone back to America to earn money to keep his family of three children going.

By mid-1927, Golda felt she had suffered enough. She began to send out feelers to comrades that she was ready to return to active work. They remembered that formally she was a member of the Histadrut’s Executive Committee and participated in the July 1927 convention in Tel Aviv, but did not speak. Her very appearance there was seen by the leadership as a clear sign that she was ending her exile in Jerusalem. The question was not whether to bring her back, but rather how to fit her into the apparatus, taking into account her talents as well as the party needs at the time.

Ben-Gurion and Remez thought that she should go back to the Women’s Labor Council. The Secretary General of that body was Ada Maimon, but she was a member of a rival socialist party called Hapoel Hatsair (The Young Worker), whereas Golda belonged to Achdut Ha’avodah. The leaders of Golda’s party viewed the Women’s Labor Council as another instrument in their control of the Histadrut. They were not sure that there was really a need for a separate women’s body within the Histadrut and some viewed the Council as a nuisance, superfluous and costly. Golda herself shared this view in 1923 when she wondered if there was need for a separate women’s group. Since then the Histadrut leaders had paid little attention to the Council and feared that Ada Maimon was aiming to use this body to enhance the fortunes of her party. In fact she on occasion voiced heretic views: apart from stipulating free and direct elections to the Histadrut institutions and based on their strength, she felt women should have at least 30% representation in all the governing bodies. This was rejected out of hand by the male-dominated Histadrut leadership. In 1925, Ada Maimon demanded

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<sup>5</sup> Shapira, Berl, p.706.

that 50% of all immigrant certificates issued by the Mandatory Government to the World Zionist Organization be granted to women. For this brazen demand she was removed from the Immigration Committee of the Histadrut. Since she had a strong and independent personality, this was resented by the leadership. Golda could be relied upon to carry out their directives without posing a serious challenge to the leadership to whom, in any case, she would be beholden for the position. They came to her with an offer she could not refuse.<sup>6</sup> It was made by Remez. In her memoirs she wrote that she met him by chance one day on Allenby Street in Tel Aviv and he asked her to take on the post of the Secretary General of the Women's Labor Council. This was an oversimplified tale. It can be safely assumed that prior to this offer being made, discussions were held among the leaders who knew of the special ties between Golda and Remez but also saw her as "one of us", a reliable functionary who would do as told and not create problems.<sup>7</sup> They were not looking for a feminist or an independent personality. Thus the Histadrut's male leadership dictated to the Women's Labor Council who their next Secretary General was going to be.

True, Golda was not parachuted from the outside. She did have some experience on the Council. As early as 1925, there had been some feelers made to Golda and to Ada Maimon suggesting that the two of them serve as co-secretaries of the Council. This was vetoed by Ada Maimon who resisted it with the passion of which she was capable. Now, two years later, the old idea re-emerged. This time, however, Maimon was unable to resist. She realized that Golda was younger, far better-looking, spoke English very well and excellent Yiddish to boot, and was learning Hebrew. She had good organizational talents and above all had close friends in the right places. Maimon was a stern, taciturn and austere spinster, older than Golda by many years, while having other, no less impressive attributes. She was a born leader, well educated, a member of a highly respected family, good speaker and writer, and a founder of the Council. But she belonged to the wrong party and was seen as too independent by Ben-Gurion and Remez.<sup>8</sup>

This was the first, but not the last time when before Golda was offered a position, it was very well cooked in the party's kitchen. Once it was well done, she was approached. When she accepted, the party went through the formal ritual of the appointment. Golda never competed for a post. She was promoted from one position to another, more senior, by the party leadership which began to appreciate

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<sup>6</sup> Daphnah Israeli, "The Women's Workers Movement in Israel from its Origins to 1927", in *Cathedra*, 32, pp. 109–140.

<sup>7</sup> Yitzhak Eilam, *On Being Close to Golda*, Tel Aviv, 1987, p. 13.

<sup>8</sup> Teveth, Ben-Gurion, Vol. II, p. 248. See also Bat Sheva Margalit-Stern, *Redemption in Shackles: The Women's Workers Movement in the Land of Israel 1920–1939*, Jerusalem 2006, pp. 133–135.

her abilities. This was the accepted system at the time—major policy decisions, and those involving senior appointments, were made behind closed doors. When all the vetting was done and the required approval obtained, a vote was taken, which usually, quickly and unanimously, confirmed the leadership's decisions.

Golda had to make a quick decision. The new position meant moving to Tel Aviv, the heart of the Yishuv, close to her family and friends. It suited her desire to return to public life, participate in the slow process of Yishuv building, while strengthening the role of her own party, the Histadrut and the Labor Movement. She was sure that the Council would also gain by her presence. But the move to Tel Aviv meant also an almost complete break with Morris. In Tel Aviv she would be free of Morris and return to the world she loved most—politics. The position was the key to her rescue from the misery of Jerusalem and from Morris. She would have a social life, go to the theater, attend concerts, travel around the country, perhaps even overseas. She would meet new and interesting people. The only drawback was that she would work for a women's organization. Years later she wrote:

The Women's Labor Council and its sister organization abroad, the Pioneer Women, were the first and the last women's organization for which I ever worked. I was attracted to them not so much because they concerned women as such, but because I was very interested in the work they were doing, particularly in the agricultural training farms they set up for immigrant girls.<sup>9</sup>

No one doubted what her decision would be, and in early 1928 she went down to Tel Aviv with her children and started work. Her son later described the move:

... within a few months she had us there (in Tel Aviv), herself, Sarah (aged two-and-a-half), and me (aged four), housed in an airy two-room flat with a large balcony overlooking the sea. We were still without gas or electricity but the new surroundings in this still new city represented change for the better, and mother's new position was truly the start of a new life for her and us.<sup>10</sup>

What remained of the harsh Jerusalem period? For the rest of her life she bore the memories of four miserable years of dire poverty, occasional hunger, loneliness and isolation. There were also memories of unemployment and the inability to contribute her share to the national political effort, frustration of once again being trapped forever. But there were also important lessons from that experience—she learned the meaning of a steady job and regular salary, the sense of security and

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<sup>9</sup> Meir, *My Life*, p. 83.

<sup>10</sup> Meir, *My Mother Golda Meir*, p. 23. See also Goldstein, *Golda*, pp. 62–103.

well-being that comes with holding a job. She also sharpened her sense of social justice and the need to fight for it. For her, these were never empty slogans, but a reality she experienced. Coming after Merhavia, the Jerusalem epoch further strengthened her character and taught her how to overcome obstacles, never to lose hope and concentrate on the important things. One can well apply to her the words of Churchill when he wrote about an illustrious hero of a different era: “The compression of circumstances, the twinge of adversity, the spurs and slights and taunts in early years are needed to evoke that ruthless fixity of purpose and tenacious mother-kit without which great actions are seldom accomplished”.<sup>11</sup>

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**11** Winston Churchill, *Marlborough—His Life and Times*, Vol. I, London, 1933, p. 23.

## 5 Apprenticeship (1928–1939)

In 1928 Golda opened a new chapter in her life. She was now entering the political arena as an apprentice, eager to learn the political process, familiarize herself with the inner workings of the particular office she held. She had a general idea of what she wanted to do, but took time to consult with friends on the meaning of the new responsibility she now shouldered and what was expected of her. Her chief mentor was David Remez.

What attracted Remez to her? A mutual friend noted that he was like an impresario, forever looking for new talent to enlist and promote in the party and Histadrut hierarchy. When he got to know Golda better, he was impressed with her ability to simplify the most complex idea and make it understandable for all. She was the opposite of so many other leaders who would obfuscate an issue even more by talking endlessly about it. Her talent was to instill in the mind of her listeners a serious idea, which would appear to them as self-evident. Her ability to popularize was for Remez a major asset for any public figure. He began to promote her and in the process her personality blossomed. In the summer of 1927, Palestine was in the midst of a major economic recession. Remez left the Public Works Office of the Histadrut and took over the Secretariat of the Histadrut's Executive Committee. In that capacity he offered her the new position.

In those days, before radio and television, the only forms of entertainment were movies, the theater, reading and visiting with friends. One of Golda's important friends was Remez. Their relationship was described years later by Remez' son Aaron:

From her first years in the country, father saw in her a major force. She possessed great potential. Her self-assurance, capacity to appear (publicly), more than he saw in her, she saw in him a man who understood her, a personal and public support...in the personal side of her life...behind the self-assured appearance, she was very feminine. She always sought a sense of support, security and warmth around her. She could not stand to be alone. The warm personal relations created between them lasted throughout my father's life. Then the custom was to conceal personal relationships, not to mix them with a public or party appearance.<sup>1</sup>

Remez provided her with a deep insight of how the Histadrut and the party functioned, and explained to her the meaning and directions of the Yishuv's politics. Barely thirty, she was becoming a junior member of the nation-building elite that was developing in Palestine in the late 1920's. Their ideology would dominate the country's politics until 1977. In this respect they claimed a record

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1 Interview in Ma'ariv, 26 February 1988.

by holding on to power for half a century, the longest consecutive period of rule in any democratic society. Like Golda, the Yishuv's leaders were born in Russia or Poland and came to Palestine in the Second and Third Aliyah. Their political growth and socialization began under the impact of the Russian revolutionary movements, where they not only learned and absorbed Socialist ideology, but managed to fuse it with their Zionist philosophy. Above all, they understood that to gain power and to retain it, they would have to create their own political base which would bestow political power on them. Prior to 1919, the Jewish community in Palestine did not have a distinct political system. There were no professional politicians who dealt exclusively in politics. There was no accepted single leader. There were a number of personalities, mainly intellectuals, teachers, writers and journalists, who devoted themselves to public work in their spare time. The First Aliyah (1882–1904) saw the creation of Workers Associations in the various settlement then called moshavot (colonies), whose main goals were to protect the interests of the Jewish workers and assure them employment, decent wages, housing, medical services and communal kitchens to feed the needy, to build mutual aid institutions, all in the best Russian populist tradition.

The first effort to unite all the Jewish workers in Palestine was made in 1900 when the Agricultural Worker Association was established, seeking to find employment for workers to prevent them from leaving the country. There was also a Print Workers Union in Jerusalem; but these efforts were sporadic and not successful. The change came in 1905 when a Socialist-Zionist party called the Young Worker—Hapoel Hatsair—was established in Petach Tikva, whose platform proclaimed that a necessary condition for Zionist fulfillment was the concentration of a large number of Jewish workers in Palestine and their entrenchment in all branches of labor. It called for a personal, pioneering fulfillment of Zionism through the conquest of labor and the revival of Hebrew culture. One of their leading ideologists was Aaron David Gordon (1856–1922), who was deeply influenced by Tolstoyan populist ideas and sought to fuse Zionism with Socialist populism. He argued that only through physical labor would people be redeemed. Jews would have to live not by their wits alone, but also by their sweat. He worshipped physical labor and the human soul and saw in both cosmic forces that would cleanse the human soul. A puritan and a pacifist, he was a great believer in ethical actions by individuals and opposed state powers. Hapoel Hatsair founders opposed the Marxist ideology of class warfare and refused to belong to the various international socialist organizations of the time. Their main argument was that conditions in Palestine were not like those prevailing in the industrialized European nations and they would have to adapt themselves to the special circumstances of the country. Their members were among those who founded the first kibbutz Degania in 1909. World War I put an end to their activities.



The other socialist party operating in Palestine at the time was Poalei Zion. Established in 1905, it held its first founding convention (which consisted of fewer than ten people) in Ramle in 1906. Its goals were the fusion of Zionism with socialism and the implementation of the ideology of return to the soil, Jewish labor (as opposed to the use of cheap unorganized Arab labor), Jewish defense, the revival of the Hebrew language and Jewish culture and the creation of new forms of social organizations and communal/collective living. The party was led by David Ben-Gurion, Yitzhak Ben-Zvi and Berl Katznelson. From Russia they brought with them the belief that the state must intervene in virtually every aspect of its citizen's life. The Russian socialist political culture under the Czars was a collectivist one which directly opposed the Western emphasis on individual freedom. The early Russian social-revolutionary thinkers, who very much influenced the thinking of the future leaders of the Yishuv and later Israel, adopted the existing Russian state ideology—the individual fulfills his role in life only if he serves society. In the West, the dominant outlook was individualism: the rights and welfare of the individual remained at the root of all political thinking and action. This was based on the assumption that each individual knows what his best interests are, and those interests should be promoted in a political framework which would set broad and general restraints. Both in the West and in Czarist Russia, it was evident that there was close link between the political and the economic systems.

In Russia, the Bolsheviks learned that the politicians must control not only the political system but the various economic organizations and institutions as well. In order to control the economy after the 1917 Revolution, the Bolshevik leaders immediately set up a centralized bureaucracy that enabled them to take over the vast Russian economy and try to run it. Lenin and his comrades taught that one of the first phases of taking over a country must be the creation of a strong political organization that would control all the economic resources and organizations. The founding fathers of Israel understood this principle only too well. The success of this group derived not only from their taking over certain institutions, but in the absence of such institutions, they would create from scratch the necessary political, social and economic institutions of the Yishuv. Thus they built the very institutions within which they operated, these became their power bases and ensured their control.

From Russia, Ben-Gurion and his associates brought to Palestine certain Leninist principles. Among them was the paramount role of the party in the direction of all political action. In 1919 they founded a new party called Achdut Ha'avodah (Unity of Labor) which was a merger of Poalei Zion and a smaller group called Tseirei Zion. Golda joined Achdut Ha'avodah when she arrived in Palestine. The full name of the party was "A Zionist-Socialist Association of the Hebrew Workers in Palestine", and its aim was the overall unity of all the Jewish (and later even

Arab) workers in the country for economic, political and social goals and action, in order to build a national Zionist-Socialist Union. Their counterpart in the Diaspora was the World Union of Poalei Zion, which espoused the same lofty ideals but, being in the Diaspora, was involved mainly in cultural activities in the various communities and fundraising for the effort in Palestine. Achdut Ha'avodah was mainly active in organizing and supporting agricultural settlements, mutual aid groups, providing loans to new immigrants and in trade union work. When the Histadrut was established in 1920, this party became the largest of its constituencies and most of its leaders operated as Histadrut functionaries. Attempts to unite all the socialist parties failed when Hapoel Hatsair refused to merge with Achdut Ha'avodah. The leaders of Achdut Ha'avodah then took over the central positions in the Histadrut, thus becoming the dominant force in the labor movement in the Yishuv. Later they dominated the entire Yishuv and in the early 1930's they already controlled the World Zionist Organization.<sup>2</sup>

The Histadrut served another purpose. The World Zionist Organization began to allocate funds for the building of the national homeland and the Labor Movement leaders wanted to obtain some of those funds. Ben-Gurion understood that the body which had a broad power base would be able to make claims for more money. He had been to the Soviet Union in 1923 and came back much impressed how the Bolsheviks took over the instruments of the state and the economy. Never a Communist, he nevertheless thought there was something to be learned from the Leninist techniques of power seizure and understood that all action must be taken in the framework of a political party.

All this was occurring in the early years of the British mandate, when the Yishuv lacked sovereignty, and the legitimacy of the central political and economic bodies was based on a voluntary society and on a broad-based consensus. The greater the power of its representative bodies, the stronger the Yishuv. The broader the political and economic base, the greater the real political and economic power of these bodies would be. The Labor leaders made sure that even the underground defense organization, the Hagannah, would be under the control of the Histadrut. Slowly the leaders came to equate their party with the Yishuv and adopted the motto—what is good for the party is good for the Yishuv, and vice versa. As they not simply impose their will on the entire community, they had to rely on their organization and persuasive powers, and on what they could provide in material terms—housing, employment, medical care, education and even culture. They were also lucky—there were no serious competing leaders or political bodies to challenge them. By 1928 the Histadrut numbered 25,400 members,

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<sup>2</sup> See Yonatan Shapira, *The Historic Achdut Ha'avodah*, Tel Aviv, 1976.

almost 15 % of the total Jewish population of the country. The Labor leaders also aspired to promote the construction of the infrastructure for the future Jewish state which they envisioned being a Zionist-Socialist one, whose destiny they would shape and guide. All this, they argued, had to be done in an evolutionary process under the protection of the British mandate. This would free them from worrying about defense, law and order and the administration of justice for the time being. The virtual autonomy granted by the British Mandatory regime to the Jewish community and its institutions suited the ideology of the founding fathers who were opposed to revolutionary steps. In this they differed from the Revisionist-Zionists led by Zeev Jabotinsky who sought the attainment of a Jewish state at once. But the latter lacked an economic base and their contribution to the building of the national homeland at this stage was marginal.

This was the arena Golda entered in January 1928 when she began her slow, steady climb up the leadership ladder. Each position eventually led to the quest for greater responsibility and more power. Golda, scarred by her Jerusalem experience, also needed much love and approval for her own self-image and esteem to make up for her failed marriage. She plunged into restless activity, doing, arranging and organizing, partly to keep herself busy and partly to demonstrate that she was equal to any job and trust her colleagues placed on her and to win the reassurance that she craved for.

Her first steps were somewhat hesitant. She started by learning in depth the range of the Women's Labor Council operations, programs and budget, its leading personalities. Once she mastered the inner workings of this body, she studied the Histadrut's structure, leadership and chain of command. Ben-Gurion, as Secretary General, dominated the Histadrut by sheer personal magnetism, powers of persuasion, charisma and ability to motivate others to action through speeches, articles and then, as later, the use of his ultimate weapon—the threat to resign if his will was not heeded. Remez looked after Solel Boneh, Hartsfeld after the Agricultural Settlement Center. Berl edited the Histadrut's daily newspaper "Davar". One of his younger assistants was Moshe Sharett. Golda shared an office with Ada Maimon and Elisheva Kaplan, Levi Eshkol's wife. Her official title was Co-Secretary General of the General Council of the Women's Workers Council, which was affiliated with the Histadrut.

Her salary was the princely sum of 13 pounds a month and would remain at this level for the next two years. She was now financially secure. From now on she would never have to worry about her next pay check.<sup>3</sup> Things went smoothly until

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<sup>3</sup> Women Workers Secretariat File 137, 1928, in the Histadrut Archives. See also Yitzhak Greenberg, "Golda in the Histadrut—Emissary and Mission", in Avizhoar, ed., *Golda—The Rise of a Leader*, pp. 137–141.

a mini-crisis erupted over the issue of who would represent the Council at the Women's International Zionist Organization (WIZO) conference that was to take place in Berlin in July 1928. Ada was sent a personal invitation and the Council decided that another delegate would accompany her so that "another comrade would also learn the ropes". Ada objected, claiming she did not need a companion, and the vote was seen by her as one of nonconfidence. The matter went up to a higher authority. In a vote taken in the Secretariat of the Histadrut's Executive Committee, Ben-Gurion voted to send one delegate, Golomb and Sprinzak in favor of sending two.<sup>4</sup> Ada and Golda set sail for Europe, Golda making her first overseas trip since she had immigrated to Palestine seven years earlier and gaining international experience and making more friends. Another shipmate was Zalman Shazar. She does not mention the conference in her memoirs and apparently it did not impress her.<sup>5</sup> The trip was problematic for another reason. Golda had to leave behind her two little children with Sheina, who cared for them in addition to her own three children. This would become the cause of constant friction between the two sisters which was enacted whenever Golda had to leave the country on an overseas trip. Morris did his share in tending to the children. He also moved to Tel Aviv and Golda arranged for him to work in the Histadrut. There is a record of a meeting of the Histadrut's Executive Committee Finance Subcommittee approving a monthly salary of 4,500 pounds for comrade Meyerson until December 1929, in addition to Golda's salary to be charged to the Women's Labor Council. Morris argued that Ben-Gurion and Golomb promised him half the salary of an unmarried man. In fact he was paid 16,866 pounds for two months and then quit. "We told comrade Meyerson", wrote Eliezer Kaplan (future first Finance Minister of Israel) and Shlomo Kaplansky,

that to the best of our knowledge, work was organized for him in the Executive Committee at the request of comrade Golda who did not want him to get a salary without working. If he says there was a different agreement made with him—Ben-Gurion told us he did not recall the details—we shall pay the sum due to him. But the Control Committee had the right to reduce Golda Meyerson's salary in case her husband had other income...If it appears that payment to the Women's Labor Council would be reduced because of the above-mentioned reasons, the Council must return to the Executive Committee the sum it will save because the Council should not 'benefit' because comrade Meyerson worked for a while in the Executive Committee.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Secretariat of the Va'ad Hapoel, 18 June 1928, pp. 250–251.

<sup>5</sup> Maimon, *Fifty Years*, p. 186; David Ben-Gurion, *Letters*, Tel Aviv, 1974, Vol. III, p. 20. See also Rachel Shazar, *The Second Shores—Letters 1909–1963*, Jerusalem, 1999.

<sup>6</sup> Teveth, Ben-Gurion, Vol. II, p. 254; Avi Raz, "Expensive Leadership", in *Ma'ariv*, 10 August 1985, pp. 30–31.

This minor and insignificant episode demonstrated the family atmosphere prevailing in the Histadrut apparatus, the involvement of the top leadership in marginal issues and the amount of time and energy they spent on these matters. By the time Morris quit the Histadrut, Golda was in America. This trip was the result of a growing tension between her and Ada. At an Executive Committee meeting dated September 20, 1928, the subject of dispatching an emissary to the Pioneer Women in America was discussed. Golda suggested that whoever was sent had to arrive in the United States in time for the October National Convention of that body. Since the matter could not be resolved in the Women's Labor Council, it was brought to the Histadrut Executive Committee Secretariat. Ada Maimon voiced her opposition to sending an emissary and criticized the direct channels of communications existing between the Pioneer Women and "certain" leaders of the Council who got funds directly from them for their pet projects. Remez intervened saying: "I shall vote for sending one comrade and not two...If the proposal would have been to send two emissaries of the same party, maybe I would have consented. I shall vote for sending Golda Meyerson. In the words of Ada I sense the atmosphere prevailing in the Council. In other institutions the situation is not so ideal, but things have not reached the stage they have reached in the Council...I consider Golda a good emissary". She was supported by five members.<sup>7</sup>

It can be assumed that Remez wanted Golda to gain broader experience abroad and also to reduce the tension in the Council and he was convinced she was there right person for the job. He also wanted to impress the Pioneer Women with a high-caliber emissary from the Histadrut. In late 1928 she left the country leaving her children in the joint care of Sheina and Morris.

The America she found after an absence of seven years was a country bursting with prosperity. Few felt the rumblings of the coming financial crash. American Jews were doing much better than before and were busy achieving the American dream. Golda realized there was a growing gap between her and other American Jews. She now spoke and raised funds on behalf of a national and social cause, the creation of a future Jewish homeland. They cared about improving their lot, sending their children to colleges, moving to better residential areas and adding to their businesses, and in general assimilating into the American social mainstream. Some looked upon those who immigrated to Palestine as losers. Immigration from the United States was virtually nonexistent. In fact, some Jews from Palestine went to America to escape the economic hardship.

Speaking in English and Yiddish, she dealt mainly with Eastern European Jews whose contributions were tiny, a few dollars, at times dimes and quar-

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<sup>7</sup> Secretariat of the Va'ad Hapoel, 20 September 1928, p. 328.

ters. She was unable to reach the wealthy strata of American Jews, the German Jewish plutocrats, who were immersed in assimilating into American society, making their fortunes, contributing to their own communities and to the general non-Jewish community as well. They were non-Zionists and a few such as the American Council for Judaism were openly anti-Zionists. She had no entry into that crowd and resented this bitterly because this was where the big money was. So she continued to preach to the converted. When she returned to Palestine there were letters of praise and requests that she return soon to continue her work.

She was hardly back in Palestine when she was off again, this time to the Sixteenth World Zionist Congress in Zurich (28 July–14 August 1929), her first Zionist Congress. Representing the American Branch of Poalei Zion, this event was important to her, although there is no record of her making a speech.<sup>8</sup> She met more people, her vision broadened and she was there at the birth of a major institution in Zionist history, the establishment of the Jewish Agency. After a ten-year struggle, Dr. Chaim Weizmann, already a legendary figure, President of the World Zionist Organization, a world-renowned chemist, the man who obtained the Balfour Declaration, who knew Herzl, finally succeeded in creating an organization that brought together the World Zionist Organization and non-Zionists leaders who supported the idea of a national Jewish homeland in Palestine. He was at last able to bring into the fold the wealthy American Jews of German origin and with them some of the richest Jews of France, England and even Germany. Among those who lent their names to the Jewish Agency were Leon Blum and Albert Einstein. Formally, the role of the Agency would be to assist the British Mandatory regime in implementing the Balfour Declaration under the mandate it was given by the League of Nations. In time, the Agency would become the quasi-government of the Yishuv, looking after immigration, absorption, settlement, defense and foreign policy which meant relations with the British government in London, other governments and the Mandatory administration in Palestine. It would also look after finances and allocate funds towards the realization of these goals. Its budget came from funds raised by Keren Hayesod, the financial arm of the World Zionist Organization.

Upon her return Golda was admitted to the Executive of the Women's Labor Council and also had the right to participate in the meetings of the Histadrut's Executive Committee. Climbing this rung on the ladder was not without its tensions. At the end of 1929 Ben-Gurion and Remez argued over the status of the Council in the Executive Committee. The issue was quite simple: Now that she was on the Council's Executive, did Golda have voting rights in the Executive

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<sup>8</sup> Protocols of the 15<sup>th</sup> Zionist Congress, London, 1929; Ben-Gurion, Letters, Vol. III, p. 56.

Committee of the Histadrut. Ada Maimon, although belonging to another party, was supported by Ben-Gurion in opposing granting Golda this privilege. He felt Ada was more senior, more experienced and had greater stature than Golda. “Besides”, said Ben-Gurion, “I do not wish to become involved in formalities”. Remez supported Golda for personal and party reasons. But Golda lost in the vote.<sup>9</sup> This little setback did not deter her and she continued to carry out her work in the Council as though nothing had happened, but her already soured relations with Ada were further strained.

Golda mastered the inner workings of the Council to such an extent that she was able to argue, in late 1929, with Eliezer Kaplan over the Council’s budget. He suggested that the Council commit itself to a partial budget. She opposed saying the idea was impractical. “The budget is not a worker you can fire. We are dealing with living organizations”. In another discussion on the issue of handing over agricultural farms where women were trained from the council to WIZO (Women International Zionist Organization), she was totally opposed: “A woman workers farm is not only a school, it is a Histadrut institution in which the woman must obtain a Histadrut education and values”, she said. She also opposed receiving money from WIZO to operate some Council facilities fearing that WIZO would demand greater control.<sup>10</sup>

In October 1929 her name was once again raised as a candidate for emissary to America. It was proposed by Moshe Beilinson, one of the party’s leading intellectuals, who was charmed not by her ideological prowess and intellectual curiosity but by her ability to get things done and cut through the maze of talk and focus on the core of any issue under discussion. But for the time being the idea was shelved.<sup>11</sup> There were further problems with Ada Maimon. In early 1930 Ben-Gurion noted in his diary that Golda had informed the Executive Committee that the Secretariat of the Women’s Labor Council was poorly organized. One employee was working half-time and the other ineffectively, both speaking poor Hebrew, and there was need to hire additional experienced staff. Ada was prepared to work, noted Golda, but not in a team, ever a loner. Relations between the two sunk to their lowest point.<sup>12</sup>

Ben-Gurion had no time or patience for such squabbles. He was involved in a historic move that would forever alter the Labor Movement in the country. After years of arduous negotiations, trying to unite the Labor camp in the Yishuv in order

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<sup>9</sup> Women Workers Council, 10 September, 1929; see also Teveth, Ben-Gurion, Vol. II, p. 491.

<sup>10</sup> Secretariat of the Va’ad Hapoel, 16 December 1929, p. 409; for the meeting of 11 October 1929, see pp. 297–301.

<sup>11</sup> Secretariat of the Va’ad Hapoel, 23 October 1929, p. 351.

<sup>12</sup> Ben-Gurion, Diary, 25 March 1930.

to be able to take over a bigger goal—the leadership of the World Zionist Organization, Ben-Gurion was able to convince the leaders of Hapoel Hatsair, among them Eliezer Kaplan and Yossef Sprinzak, that power also lay in numbers and size was important in effecting social and political changes. They agreed and the founding convention of the newly merged party called Mapai (The Party of the Workers of Eretz Israel) took place in Tel Aviv on January 5, 1930, with 280 delegates representing a membership of almost 4000. When the party's Central Committee was elected, Golda was included and there she was, with Ben-Gurion, Berl, Tabenkin, Yavne'eli, Kaplan, Sprinzak, Remez, Ada Maimon and others. This group would now lead the Jewish community of Palestine during the thirties, the struggle against the British in the forties, the War of Independence and the formative years of the State of Israel in the fifties and sixties. The last to survive would be Golda Meir, then the youngest. She would remain in power until 1974. This elite group would implant its stamp on the Yishuv and the State, seeing themselves responsible not only for the welfare of the workers and party members, but also for the national struggle and the fulfillment of the Zionist dream—the creation of a Jewish state. At age 32, Golda was now part of this select group, numbering less than twenty men and women who would shoulder this Herculean and historic task which was thrust on them by fate and choice. Mapai would be the dominant party in the country until its disintegration in the early 1970's.

The next opportunity for Golda to shine came in June 1930. She was elected a member of the Palestine Labor Movement delegation to the Conference of the (Imperial) Commonwealth Labor Movement held in London. In recent years the relations between Arabs and Jews and between the Jewish community and the British Mandatory administration soured following massive Arab rioting in August 1929 over what they perceived as an attempt by the Jews to change the status-quo in the Western Wall in Jerusalem's Old City. In the riots, almost the entire Jewish community of Hebron was massacred and scores of Jews were killed in other towns. The riots demonstrated the weakness of the Yishuv and the need to re-organize the Hagannah. In the wake of the riots, a British Commission of Inquiry was sent to Palestine to investigate the root causes of the "disturbances" as the British elegantly referred to the riots. The Shaw Commission came, saw and went. It recommended that Jewish immigration to Palestine be curtailed to fit the absorptive capacity of the country and to ensure that Arab peasants would not be dispossessed.

The new British policy was proclaimed in a statement named the Passfield White Paper. Lord Passfield was a leading British Socialist (known also as Sydney Webb). His attitude towards Zionism was negative and he spoke for that part of the British Labor Party that feared the Zionist social experimentations in Palestine, thinking the Jewish settlers were more communists than socialists. There



was also a twinge of anti-semitism as the Jews with whom the British Labor Party leaders had experience with were the Eastern European Jews in London's East End, some of whom were landlords, traders and money-lenders, and not the great Anglo-Jewish intellectuals of the time. In 1930, the Labor Party dominated the British Government, which was headed by Prime Minister Ramsey MacDonald. Hence it was thought that a high-powered Labor delegation from Palestine was required. Ben-Gurion, Dov Hoz and Shlomo Kaplansky (Mapai's emissary to Britain) were also in the delegation.<sup>13</sup>

Golda started her journey to Britain by attending a Conference of Socialist Women and then traveled extensively through England addressing women's groups, explaining to them the work of the Histadrut. During the Imperial Labor conference a heated exchange erupted between Golda and Drummond Shills, the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Colonies. Speaking on July 21, 1930, Golda vehemently attacked British policy on Palestine, accusing that country of reneging on her promises contained in the Balfour Declaration and the League of Nations Mandate. Shills charged the Jews with ingratitude, saying that only under British rule could they develop the Yishuv. Both were right. Writing to his wife, Ben-Gurion was deeply impressed with Golda's performance: "I was stunned by the force of her speech. Her speech shocked the conference. She spoke proudly, forcefully, bitterly, painfully and in good taste. Although I have heard of her success in the Women's Conference and at other meetings arranged for her by the Labor Party, her words came to me as an enormous surprise".<sup>14</sup>

This successful trip was not without its toll on her relations with Sheina. On the way to London, Golda wrote to Sheina a heart-wrenching letter which showed her dilemma in the most poignant manner:

I ask only one thing, that I be understood and believed. My social activities are not an accidental thing; they are an absolute necessity for me. I am hurt when Morris and others say that this is all superficial, that I am trying to be modern. It is silly. Do I have to justify myself? Before I left, the doctor assured me that Sarale's health permits my going, and I have made adequate arrangements for Menachem. And yet you can understand how hard it is for me to leave. But in our present situation I could not refuse to do what was asked of me. Believe me, I know I will not bring the Messiah, but I think that we must miss no opportunity to explain what we want and what we are to influential people. One thing is clear. I have only two alternatives: one, to cut off my connections with all outside interests as I once did at Morris's insistence, or go to Ein Harod. I have no further strength for my present life. My sole problem is what is better for the children...<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Joseph Gorny, *The British Labor Movement and Zionism 1917–1948*, London, 1983.

<sup>14</sup> Ben-Gurion, *Letters*, Vol. III, p. 122.

<sup>15</sup> Meir, *My Life*, p. 87.

This letter explains more than any other document the state of her private life at the time. As she rose slowly from one position to another, she had to confront and deal with growing criticism leveled by Morris and Sheina. What she saw as central and vital, they thought was superficial and even vulgar. They often used the Yiddish word *narishkeit* or not serious, unworthy, nonsense. The term superficial stung her sharply, and in the future she would rail at those who accused her of being superficial. For her the dictate of the party was a higher law, superceding the well-being of her children. In the name of the party she would justify many of her decisions. As for her daughter Sarah, she contracted a kidney inflammation and had to be under constant care and observation. Responsibility for the children during Golda's absences fell on Morris and Sheina and both resented Golda for this burden. In the letter she also mentioned the possibility of joining kibbutz Ein Harod, but did not elaborate. There is no record of her investigations. Golda, as seen in this letter, was hard on herself. Her concern was for her budding career, now nicely launched. The party and the Histadrut would brook no objections for personal reasons. They came to appreciate her talents and relied on her for constant, devoted and selfless duty.

It was inevitable that Golda's free life style would become the source of much gossip. It was virtually impossible to separate the private from the public life of the leaders, although Aaron Remez remembered differently. The Yishuv was tiny and there was barely any privacy. The leaders lived in homes whose doors were never locked. One knew what was taking place inside the homes of others. Special relations were entered into by some of the leaders and younger women. Berl, Ben-Gurion, Remez and Shazar had extra-marital affairs. Those who suffered were their wives and children. Golda was attractive, separated from her husband and available. She even made strenuous efforts to convince Berl's wife that she had no affair with her husband. Remez remembered that "...there was envy around her. Berl was interested in her. Everyone was interested in her. She was a type". Shazar's wife, Rachel Katznelson, a very strong personality in her own right, admired Golda, although she knew that Golda had a long love affair with Shazar in the 1930's.

During those years Golda's bonds with Remez intensified.<sup>16</sup> Her name began to appear more often in his diary. By now he felt greater responsibility for her political growth and development. He was twelve years her senior, married and father of two children. He was not an impressive figure, being short and rather paunchy, but beneath a genial appearance there was a man of enormous drive, a first-class leader and organizer, a visionary who spoke excellent Hebrew. He was

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<sup>16</sup> Sarah Erez, A Certain period in the life of David Remez, Tel Aviv, 1977.

a writer and poet, a man of vast patience, a true Socialist, at home with the great thinkers and authors, an ideal mentor for Golda. Their liaison became the talk of Tel Aviv, but the gossip was not always malicious. Many understood Golda's need for a strong father figure, an intellectual and a doer combined into one. He also helped her rise in the ranks of the party and the Histadrut. Of their affair she permitted herself to write many years later in her memoirs: "We saw a great deal of each other, and we had much in common in terms of our approach to things. Remez was one of the very few comrades with whom I even discussed any personal, non-political matters, and I relied a great deal on his advice and guidance—and miss them to this day".<sup>17</sup>

Concurrently she carried on an affair with Zalman Shazar, in many respects a man similar to Remez, but more outgoing and a first-class orator and writer. This attachment to Shazar angered Remez, who expressed his views in a particularly nasty letter dated June 14, 1930. He preferred to write rather than to speak to her as he did not want to create a scene:

...if I wanted to hurt you, I probably wouldn't say what I am going to say to you...I once wrote you perhaps that sweet words are easy, they don't cost anything and are pleasant to hear. We always avoid talking about serious things...My opinion, Golda, the trouble with you is you were raised on praises. No question you are successful. I don't question your social earnestness. You are not a mensch. For you there is no individual. It's only the masses...In my small world the individual is important. For you the majority is important. Maybe you are right... We'll end our friendship, which is so tragic, with misunderstanding and friction...

He continued to lash out at her angrily when he criticized her behavior towards her husband. Remez icily wrote that if Morris was a stronger personality he would never have allowed Golda to spit in his face—...and then went on at length to describe Morris's misery, her own ungrateful behavior, and mentioned her refusal to divorce Morris. Instead, he said, she "eloped" with Shazar. He struck at Golda's most vulnerable spots. Feeling deeply betrayed, he portrayed her as a superficial personality, lacking depth and feeling contemptuous of human relations.<sup>17</sup> The letter hurt her because it came from a man who knew her well and helped shape her as a public figure. He was badly hurt because Shazar was also a close friend of his. Golda's affair with Shazar continued passionately in New York in the early 1930's. Later they often saw each other in Palestine, at Zionist Congresses in Europe, on other overseas missions and again in America. But she never gave up her friendship with Remez.

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<sup>17</sup> Meir, *My Life*, p. 92; for the letter by Remez, see Martin, *Golda*, p. 174; for Shazar see Haggai Tsoref, ed. *Zalman Shazar—Israel's Third President, Selected Documents, (1889–1974)*, Jerusalem, 2008.

By the fall of 1930, the Great Depression was being felt badly in Palestine. Contributions from America fell drastically. The Histadrut had to curtail many of its operations, plan its budget according to the new economic reality and consider ways to increase its income. As usual, the solution was to send additional and more effective emissaries to America to recruit members for the Poalei Zion and Pioneer Women movements and above all to raise the more urgently needed funds.

Golda, as always, was the prime candidate for the task. She resisted, but once she saw the figures (\$175,000 needed to be raised in 1930), she knew she would have to go. In a September 1930 Executive Committee Secretariat meeting she noted that less than 40,000 out of the four million American Jews participated in the Histadrut campaign. Although small in number, it was still important. And she added: “Much has been done, but little in the area of public information in English”. She felt that in addition to funds, immigration from America was also important. “Ours is the last generation. The younger generation is being lost. The youth in America have two options—Communism or Zionism”. She ignored the third option—total assimilation. Her conclusion as usual was pragmatic—more emissaries needed to work mainly with the younger generation. A week later, Remez complimented her on her work in the United States in the previous year: “We have seen that people we thought would succeed did not succeed. There were doubts concerning Golda’s candidacy, and now it is very difficult to come to America after Golda”.<sup>18</sup> She summed up her own views on the campaign:

I have never differentiated between the movement and the campaign. That is why I opposed all sorts of deals with the Keren Hayesod Campaign (the official Zionist fundraising campaign). I cannot imagine any Labor Movement in Palestine without a campaign. I was in America with Merminsky and saw with what enthusiasm his speeches were received when he spoke of the Max Fein (vocational) school, while I recalled the miserable hut in which this school was housed. We cannot continue the campaign and there will be no Movement unless we provide this activity with content and I see no other content but settlements. We should not aspire high, but if we come to America and point at fifty families that were absorbed with the help of the campaign, that will yield much.<sup>19</sup>

At the end of 1931 she was once again proposed as an emissary to America for the next annual campaign. Golomb and Kaplan supported her candidacy to be a multipurpose emissary: to deal with education, recruitment, organization and fundraising. She resisted, saying that “I say again that my trip to America this year is totally out of the question”. But few took this statement seriously. It was

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**18** Secretariat of the Va’ad Hapoel, 1 September 1930, 3 September 1930, pp 268, 268, 275

**19** Mapai Central Committee, 21 October 1934; see Anita Shapira, “The Debate in Mapai on Violence”, in *Zionism*, 3 (1981), pp.120–121.

the accepted form. In the next two weeks her colleagues broke her resistance and Remez was able to announce on September 10, 1931 that “the negotiations with Golda were also completed”.<sup>20</sup> The fact that Shazar was going to be in the United States may have also influenced her decision. She left the country at the end of 1931 and began her whirlwind work around America. But this time her personal problems mounted. She left behind a very sick daughter. In a 1988 interview, Sarah said: “She would travel for many months and leave behind a very sick child. This did not prevent her from traveling. Today I do not understand how she could do so. I would never leave my own children”.<sup>21</sup> But Golda did and threw herself into her work, perhaps to atone for her absence from her daughter’s bedside.

In the middle of 1932 an urgent cable arrived from Morris. Sarah’s health was rapidly deteriorating and he demanded that Golda return immediately to Tel Aviv. He did not want to take sole responsibility for their daughter’s health. She rushed back home, a three-week journey under the best of circumstances. This time she asked the Histadrut and party to allow her to return to and remain in America for the time needed to help her daughter recover. She rightly assumed that American doctors would cure her daughter and that this time she had to be with her. The Histadrut granted her wishes. Before setting out again, she reported to her colleagues on the American situation and offered a number of insights and solutions:

Although we read and hear much, we really do not know what is actually going on in America. If the unemployed worker at least hopes to return to work, the middle class is worse off, they have lost everything, including hope. The situation worsened during my stay...The Teachers Training College in Chicago was closed. Many other schools and institutions were also closed. It is very difficult to address people now. The Zionist Organization is paralyzed. In Milwaukee, Lipsky, who always opposed our campaign, forced a United Campaign fearing that there would be no Keren Hayesod Campaign at all. Nevertheless there is growing interest in Palestine but it is in no way proportional to the real, concrete results. The prestige of the Histadrut is high, Palestine is in fact the Histadrut, the Valleys and the workers. Serious people say that there is no more talk of Zionism except for Socialist Zionism.

This rosy impression was far from the truth. No wonder she had to admit that the campaign remained on the same level as in the previous year and they had not recruited new people. They attempted to establish new chapters in California and in Canada, but there was much ignorance about Palestine and the comrades were getting older. She noted that the “Communists are penetrating everywhere...There is so much ground for work, but we have to send to America four or five people. We must have people or else there will be no Movement and no campaign”.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ma’ariv 26 February, 1988

<sup>22</sup> Secretariat of the Va’ad Hapoel, 7 July 1932, p. 186.

For the next two years, Golda would remain in America, traveling, organizing and raising funds. Meanwhile, doctors in New York Beth Israel hospital were able to cure Sarah and Golda decided to extend her mission to mid-1934. If she thought that by remaining in America she was missing great developments in Palestine, in retrospect she was wrong.

The Histadrut was growing, much of it because of the mass immigration pouring into the country from Germany in the wake of Hitler's rise to power in January 1933. In the first years of Nazi rule, Jews could still get out of Germany with assets and money. The Histadrut in fact arranged for what was called "transfer" of money received by German Jews selling their assets before leaving for Palestine. In the early 1930's, the Jewish community of Palestine almost doubled from some 200,000 to 400,000. The British government did not hamper this flow of people and the local Arabs were strangely quiet. In 1933 alone, some 60,000 immigrants arrived, many bringing with them capital, education, managerial and scientific skills. The Histadrut now had to help absorb this mass of immigrants, but the task was relatively easy, as they established factories and there was growing demand for housing, schools and hospitals. The Yishuv felt a growing sense of confidence, although the scourge of unemployment was still noticeable.

Golda watched all this from America, moving from city to city although her headquarters was in the Pioneer Women's office in New York City. She spent sleepless nights on crowded buses and overheated trains. The luxury of flying was not for her, nor did she stay in decent hotels. She was normally put up by the comrades and spent endless hours talking to her hosts and their friends. She amply demonstrated her ability to "make a complex idea simple and understood by all...Her talent was to instill in the mind of her audience a serious idea that would be self-evident..."<sup>23</sup> Her message was simple: The Yishuv was engaged in building the future national homeland. At the forefront were the workers, organized in the Histadrut, a body that was seeing to the needs of the old-timers and the new immigrants. Support for the Histadrut and its many operations meant support for the entire national effort. She strongly espoused the ideology of the Labor Movement which argued that independence would be achieved only when the Jews created their own political, economic, social and eventually military infrastructure in Palestine. She supported the evolutionary approach and criticized the Zionist-Revisionists demand for immediate independence and a Jewish state with a Jewish majority. She and her colleagues feared this declarative policy would alienate Britain, whose protection and support the Yishuv needed.

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<sup>23</sup> Eilam, *Close to Golda*, pp. 45–49.

As Golda's mission was coming to an end, she could report with satisfaction that the number of Pioneer Women's membership had almost doubled, from 2000 to 4000, organized in some 90 chapters. Younger women, who wanted ideological content in their lives and not just to be part of a social club, were joining. Golda found an easy rapport with those women, as described by the Mapai leader Yossef Sprinzak:

Golda is constantly on the road. She does very important work here. Her personal charm, manner of speaking, knowledge of America and her English education (sic), she finished college here prepared her for her successful work. Everywhere there is an attitude of appreciation and admiration for her. She is not content with her special mission, but appears at public meetings, party meetings, before non-Jews and at universities. Of all the people who were here, she is probably by far the most suitable and successful for this place and for the existing situation.

In another letter, Sprinzak called her “Golda Meyerson, the darling of the movement and those close to it, in the talent of her speech and the manner of her actions she combines the best of America and of our own movement”.<sup>24</sup>

Upon her return to Palestine in 1934, she was rewarded by another promotion. She was removed from the Women's Labor Council and joined the Va'ad Hapoel (Histadrut Executive Committee), its top organ. With full voting rights, Golda, at 36, was now a full-fledged member of the inner circles of Mapai and the Histadrut. She knew her promotion was the outcome of hard work in Palestine and abroad, her ability to impress her superiors so that she won their trust and respect. But all this came at a heavy price—she in fact sacrificed her family life for the party, the movement, the Histadrut and the Yishuv. In the absence of a home, these bodies became her surrogate home and also her power base. She did so out of her free will, reflecting partly her growing ambitions. She never looked upon the acquisition of power and positions as ends to themselves. Power was to be used sparingly and wisely for the advancement of causes, of people, of the party. She learned early on that in Mapai and the Histadrut the principle of seniority has an important role and that one must subordinate oneself to the more powerful and elder leadership. Only the leadership could reward and promote, and if one wanted to be effective, one had to cooperate with the leadership. Since she always attempted to seek consensus, she became very adept at consensus politics, which meant in effect the avoidance of public controversies and refraining from establishing an independent power base. Once again, Golda proceeded very cautiously and carefully as she learned her way around the new surroundings in which

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<sup>24</sup> Joseph Sprinzak Letters, Tel Aviv, 1969, Vol. 2, pp. 257–258, 274–275.

she operated—the Va'ad Hapoel. She did not regret leaving the Women's Labor Council. It had become too small for her. She also found herself at odds with Ada Maimon all the time and realized the futility of this constant bickering. From now on she would operate in a man's world and compete with men on equal footing.

In 1934 Mapai gained control over the World Zionist Organization and the Jewish Agency. Ben-Gurion was elected Chairman of the Executive of the Jewish Agency. Kaplan became the treasurer, Sharett was in charge of foreign relations as Head of the Political Department, a position he gained after the assassination of the incumbent Chaim Arlosoroff by unknown assailants in 1933. The murder was pinned on the Revisionists by the Labor Movement and passions were inflamed. Labor accused the right-wing Revisionists and their leader, Zeev Jabotinsky, of fascist tendencies. Revisionists were involved in strikebreaking and were barred from the Histadrut. Violent encounters between the two camps were common. In October 1934, Labor supporters evicted Revisionists from a meeting. Golda was upset, and addressing the Mapai Central Committee on October 21, 1934, she said: "The youngsters who took part in this action should at least have been ashamed and not flaunted their victory...I cannot justify all violence, and yet, I can understand using force against strikebreakers...but to organize 1,500 people in order to throw out eighty Revisionists from a closed meeting, that is not courageous".<sup>25</sup> The tensions threatened to break up the Yishuv's unity. Ben-Gurion, then working in London, decided to arrange for a cease-fire with Jabotinsky, seeking reconciliation and understanding. He worked out an agreement with the Revisionist leader. But as was his wont, he did not consult his colleagues in Tel Aviv on this matter and they resented this independent move. When word of the agreement reached Tel Aviv, some of the Mapai leaders met in Berl Katznelson's office in "Davar". Among them were Golda, Sprinzak, Tabenkin, Golomb and Beilinson. They decided that the agreement as it stood was worthless unless approved by a referendum of the entire Histadrut membership.<sup>26</sup>

Ben-Gurion retorted from London that he sought to achieve unity in his capacity as Chairman of the Jewish Agency Executive, a "national" rather than sectarian role. On the issue itself, Golda supported Ben-Gurion's stand together with Kaplan and Sharett. They feared that Diaspora Jewry would not understand why Jews were beating up other Jews. Besides, they argued, there were more pressing problems. The party's unity was threatened and there were calls that Berl undertake the role of Mapai Secretary General to consolidate

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<sup>25</sup> Mapai Central Committee, 21 October 1934; see Anita Shapira, "The Debate in Mapai on Violence", in *Zionism*, 3 (1981), pp. 120–121.

<sup>26</sup> Erez, Remez, p. 160.



the party and restore its standing. Ben-Gurion, Remez, Golda and Ben-Zvi supported this idea.<sup>27</sup>

On this issue Golda had a confrontation with Remez. On October 30, 1934, he noted in his diary that he had sharply argued his case before Golda, complaining bitterly about Ben-Gurion's behavior. "Where is the comradely attitude? How can he sit in London and negotiate? Even if the negotiations were a must, why not involve colleagues, both opponents and supporters?"<sup>28</sup> She disagreed with him. Both knew this was how Ben-Gurion operated. He acted on his own when he felt the need to do so, and when challenged, he would resort to his favorite threat—resignation. Golda was never impressed with this method but usually understood his motives. In the future, Ben-Gurion's way of doing things would enrage his colleagues, often left in the dark, and cause a huge rift between him and the rest of the leadership. When the referendum was carried out, Ben-Gurion lost. The agreement was defeated by 16,474 to 11,522 votes.

Golda's initial duties in the Executive Committee were looking after overseas guests. In 1936, she headed the Histadrut's Department dealing with mutual aid programs and later headed the key Trade Union Division, charged with negotiating labor contracts with employers. In 1940, following Doz Hoz' death in a car accident, she also headed the Histadrut's Political Department, the organization's "foreign ministry". In this capacity she dealt with the Histadrut's international contacts, ties with the Jewish Agency and the Mandatory Administration. By the mid-1930's, the Histadrut's membership rose to 70,000 (out of a Jewish community numbering some 375,000 souls). One in five Jews in the country was a Histadrut member, which gave this body enormous power. In addition to fulfilling classic trade union functions such as labor relations, wages, pensions and other workers' rights, the Histadrut developed its own economic enterprises, initially to provide work for the unemployed, and later to compete with private entrepreneurs in the country. A body called "Hevrat Ovdim" (Workers Association) was established in the 1920's. Among its subsidiary companies was Solel Boneh, for which Golda once worked. There were other enterprises in agriculture, industry, finance (Bank Hapoalim), and mutual aid. Its key body was Kupat Cholim (The Sick Fund) which provided medical insurance for almost half of the Jewish population. Public transportation cooperatives offered bus services so that the Yishuv would not have to rely on the railways operated by the Mandatory Government or on Arab bus companies. The Histadrut was also engaged in extensive cultural work and had its own daily newspaper, a publishing company, theater, youth

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<sup>27</sup> Shapira, Berl, p. 491.

<sup>28</sup> Erez, Remez, p. 162.

and women's organizations, a sports movement and, above all, its own Labor-oriented school system. The Hagannah was also partly under the supervision of the Histadrut (and later the Jewish Agency). This was a mini-empire which provided the Labor Movement and Mapai at its head with its economic and political base. The Histadrut had now become one of the country's leading employers, something that occasionally resulted in embarrassing situations, especially when its own workers struck for higher wages.

To operate this growing machinery, the Histadrut built its own bureaucracy which numbered in the hundreds, and later thousands of employees. They were all involved in achieving one of the main goals of this body—the creation of a true workers' society in Palestine which would be the cornerstone of the future Jewish state. Meanwhile, the Histadrut fought Jewish capitalists and employers and called on them to provide work for the growing number of immigrants. The Histadrut also looked after kibbutzim and moshavim, the jewels of the newly emerging equal and just Jewish society in Palestine.

The supreme body of the Histadrut was the National Convention whose delegates were elected in general elections by the entire membership. Naturally, this involved only Labor parties. The Convention chose the Council, which in turn chose the Executive Committee, which in turn appointed a small secretariat headed by the Secretary General; from 1934 Remez filled this position. By 1935, Golda was a key player in a number of bodies: Histadrut's Secretariat, Mapai's Central Committee, delegate to the Elected Assembly of Palestinian Jewry, member of the Hagannah and one of the twenty decision makers in the Yishuv. Their power derived from the principle that the center controls the various bodies, organizations and associations. The leadership in fact was self-perpetuating. The top positions were determined by what became known as an "Arrangement Committee" who saw to it that only loyal party leaders would be elected to the top positions.

From 1934, Golda attended most of the meetings of the Executive Committee and the Secretariat. She often spoke, never at length, always to the point, sometimes breaking into the debate to score a point. She did not contribute to the ideology of the Movement, preferring to follow the path set by her elders. She was the first to admit that she was not an intellectual and in fact was often proud of that. She could never compete with her colleagues, most of whom were, compared to her, intellectual giants. Berl, Ben-Gurion, Beilinson, Remez and Shazar were men of great learning, first-class writers and orators, keen to learn and argue major universal issues. All of them relied on logic and analysis of the facts before making up their minds, rather than on intuition, sentiments, emotions or sheer willpower. The latter traits were more applicable to Golda. Many of her detractors used them against her, claiming that she was an intellectual

lightweight, weighing problems in a lackadaisical and superficial manner. She was never concerned with her image. She paid greater attention to substance than to nuance, although she was the first to admit that many of ideas were borrowed from others, chiefly her mentors.

She deeply resented it when Morris referred to her activities as superficial. She had enough of intellectuals, Morris being the model of one who was ineffective and could barely earn a living. But she understood that she lacked the inner depth and the systematic and organized reading and thinking, so she clung to the greater minds. She admired Berl and Ben-Gurion and she loved Remez and Shazar for their brilliant minds. They provided her with some intellectual stimulation, with ideas, with a sense of being with wise men. Unlike Morris, they were all men of action, vision, who moved people and institutions. They were the doers. Facing these men, she knew her proper place in the hierarchy. Their approval was enough for her and she tried to make sure there would be no feelings of envy or resentment of her growing prestige and standing.

Since 1928, and especially now, she had become the model apparatchik. Huntington and Brzezinsky defined an apparatchik as a political-bureaucrat who devotes his life to the party, rising from one position to a higher one, and for whom a political career is normally more than a full-time commitment. In the course of her career, Golda would move up the hierarchy to positions of broader and greater responsibilities while functioning exclusively in a bureaucratic environment. Her rise depended on her position in the party's and Histadrut's bureaucratic structure. In fact, she was the product of the bureaucratization of the party and the Federation of Labor. But for her the party was much more than the only means of livelihood. It became her entire and total environment, her true home. She gave both institutions her full commitment and loyalty. They in turn rewarded her with the highest positions they could offer, culminating with the position of prime minister of Israel. Politics was almost the sole preoccupation of the leadership. It gave them a sense of economic security and they were beholden to the party and the Histadrut for this. But they also felt they were in the midst of creating a new society, laying the foundations for a future Jewish state. Golda thrived in this system which she understood, and she respected the rules she helped make and enforce. Anyone who wanted a shortcut to the top positions was suspect to her. Her performance was based on political good sense, skill, intuition, energy, spending endless hours in the office or at meetings, increasing her confidence in herself as her Hebrew improved and she was able to communicate her thoughts more easily in that language. Her growing self-confidence added to her ambitions. She had to constantly prove to herself and mainly to her husband and sister that she was made of the steel of which great leaders are cast. This would be partial compensation for the absence of a normal home and family

life, for her ties with married men. Being a highly disciplined woman, she kept her ambitions tightly under rein.

In 1935 she was once again sent to America on a Histadrut information and fundraising campaign.<sup>29</sup> This time she went with Shazar. This hardly raised eyebrows. In the little Yishuv, it was well-known that Ben-Gurion, Remez, Shazar and even Berl Katznelson had extra-marital affairs. But the media did not mention these occurrences and few asked the leaders what they did in their spare time. Overseas trips were a good opportunity for these affairs. A voyage to Europe took at least five days at sea, and five days back. In Europe (or America) it was easier to meet. When Golda returned, there were a number of discussions how to strengthen the position of the Histadrut abroad. At a May 1, 1935 meeting of Mapai emissaries in Europe, a proposal was broached to establish a European branch of the Women's Labor Council (similar to Pioneer Women in America).<sup>30</sup> Naturally, the choice for heading this body was Golda. In July 1935 Ben-Gurion raised the idea of appointing Golda as the Histadrut's "ambassador" to America.<sup>31</sup> She was not sure this was a compliment. Always beset by self-doubts, she wondered whether the leadership thought that her talents lay overseas and not in the country. Did they want to get rid of her politely by finding her jobs abroad? There was hardly any discussion of emissaries in which her name was not prominently mentioned. But for the time being she remained at home, dealing with labor disputes, strikes, budgets and relations with other economic sectors in the country. She was also chosen to be a member of a group that oversaw the operations of the Sick Fund. By now it was obvious that she would attend every Zionist Congress as Mapai delegate. In that capacity she rose to address (in Yiddish) the 19<sup>th</sup> Zionist Congress in Luzern on September 2, 1935:

We must carry out a determined stand against Hitler's Germany, but we cannot allow the idea that the Zionist Movement is apathetic to the suffering of the German Jews to prevail and we must take all measures to rescue these Jews from the German inferno. There were times when we reacted to the suffering of the Jewish people by shouting and protesting. The only ray of light in the present is that apart from yelling and protesting, we have scores of possibilities to do something tangible to save tens of thousands of Jews. We, the Zionist Movement, must undertake the responsibility for saving Jewish souls, Jewish property, and save as many people as possible for a new life in Palestine.<sup>32</sup>

Serious problems awaited her in Palestine and the most pressing was the rising unemployment. The Arab Rebellion (or "Riots", as they were known by the Jews,

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 238.

<sup>30</sup> Ben-Gurion, *Memories*, Vol. II, p. 302.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 373.

<sup>32</sup> Protocols of the 19<sup>th</sup> Zionist Congress, 1937, p. 592.

“Disturbances” or “Troubles” by the British) which broke out in April 1936 and the Italian war against Ethiopia resulted in greater unemployment. The Histadrut faced the perennial question: should it provide unemployment benefits or attempt to create new jobs in Histadrut enterprises. They decided to do both. To meet the financial needs, a special unemployment fund was launched, whose income derived from levying a tax on Histadrut members who still had jobs at the rate of one day’s salary per month. The name of the tax was Mifdeh (Redemption), a name naturally coined by Remez. It netted some 60,000 pounds in 1938, 38,000 a year later and 24,000 in 1940. Golda participated in the discussions on this tax and was actively involved in the 1939 campaign. Her task was more of an educational one: how to instill in the minds of the rank and file that there was a principle of mutual aid. She saw unemployment as unjust, a serious threat to immigration which could drive people away from the country. She insisted that Mifdeh funds be used to create new workplaces, care for the families of the unemployed and prevent unscrupulous employers from exploiting the present situation to reduce wages.<sup>33</sup> She was also busy trying to obtain tenure to those engaged in the building trade. When she demanded that tenure be granted even to Solel Boneh employees, she had a clash with the heads of this Histadrut enterprise. They were afraid of setting a precedent by giving tenure to transient workers.

Another issue she was involved in was that of hired workers in the cooperatives and the reluctance of the heads of these cooperatives to grant them tenure. Although she participated in a committee charged to find a solution to this problem, they were unsuccessful. Golda thought that tenure could be granted gradually, but failed in her efforts to convince others. She, who opposed hired hands in the cooperatives, now had to find them employment. Her ideology clashed with the harsh reality. The protocols of the various Histadrut organs, mainly the Trade Union Division, headed by Golda, are replete with discussions on this issue.

The Arab rebellion now occupied the full attention of the Yishuv’s leaders. The number of Jews killed by Arabs rose, material damage was noticeable. The Arabs reacted to the growing number of Jewish immigrants who were slowly transforming the Yishuv. More kibbutzim and moshavim were established, as well as factories, orange groves were planted, homes built, and Jewish self-confidence grew. The Yishuv still thought that the British would protect them. But the Arab leadership felt that the international situation favored them. With the rise of fascist Italy and Nazi Germany, the British would have to seek Arab allies in the Mediterranean and they would tolerate the growing number of Jewish

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<sup>33</sup> Eilam, *Close to Golda*, pp. 11–12; Yitzhak Eilam, *The Paths of Action*, Tel Aviv, 1974, p. 77.

casualties in Palestine. They continued to reiterate their traditional demands—a halt to Jewish immigration, annulment of the Balfour Declaration, termination of the Mandate and granting immediate independence to Palestine with an Arab majority. This could spell the end of the Zionist enterprise.

During the first weeks of the riots, Golda was in America raising funds for the Histadrut. On July 16, 1936, she sailed on the “Acquitanian” to France, met Ben-Gurion in Paris and proudly informed him that Justice Louis D. Brandeis had contributed 25,000 dollars to the Histadrut campaign.<sup>34</sup> Upon her return, Remez planned an unusual assignment for her. He explained to her that the Arab rebellion cut off the port of Jaffa from the rest of the country, making it inaccessible to Jews. The highway to Haifa in those days passed through Arab towns and was considered dangerous for Jews to travel on. Haifa port was also inaccessible. This could have a disastrous effect on exports, mainly of citrus fruit, and on immigration. Foreign shipping companies were threatening to halt their sailing to the country until things quieted down. The leadership sensed that total dependence on foreign shipping companies, such as the French “Messageries Maritimes” and the Italian “Lloyd Triestino”, was problematic. Two ideas were being studied. The first was to build a deep-sea port north of Tel Aviv, to handle passengers and freight, thus bypassing Jaffa. The second was the establishment of a Jewish shipping company and the purchase of both passenger and cargo ships who would sail under the Jewish flag. Both ideas required huge sums of money and were not supported by the British Government. The Jewish Agency and the Histadrut held consultations and decided to embark on the two projects simultaneously. Within a few weeks, a pier was built in north Tel Aviv enabling ships to anchor offshore and unload their cargo and passengers to smaller boats that would take them to the quay on shore. The Tel Aviv port started operations in late 1936, to the chagrin of the Arabs. The second idea was far more complex. The Yishuv had no time to place orders for new ships, which meant buying used vessels. The visionary once again was Remez.

In late 1936 he called Golda to his office for what he described as a “heart-to-heart” talk, which he recorded in his diary. He wanted a personal favor of her and expected her to answer in the Biblical phrase: “You shall say and I will answer”.<sup>35</sup> He asked her to go to America and sell shares to establish a Jewish steamship company, thus ending dependence on foreign companies. This would provide young Jews with jobs and lay the foundation for a future Jewish navy. The name of the company would be Nachson, named after the biblical figure

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<sup>34</sup> Ben-Gurion, *Memories*, Vol. III, Tel Aviv, 1973, p. 175.

<sup>35</sup> Interview with Golda Meir in the Remez Volume, pp. 255–256; see also Zvi Herman, *History of Hebrew Shipping*, Tel Aviv, 1978, pp. 65–66.

who was the first to jump into the Red Sea when the Israelites made their exodus from Egypt. She was at once infected with his zeal. Here was something concrete that could be marketed to American Jews. No longer appealing for charity, this would be asking them to invest in a shipping enterprise which would also have significant national and security ramifications. For the first time, the Histadrut was going to sell shares in one of its own companies. Jews would be proud seeing the blue and white flag flying on the masts of Jewish vessels. In this way citrus fruits could be transported to Europe in an attempt to evade the Arab blockade on the port of Jaffa.

Before proceeding to America, she appeared before the Royal Commission headed by Lord Peel, sent by the British Government to investigate the causes of the Arab rebellion and to make recommendations regarding the future of the country. On December 30, 1936, she addressed the Commission as Histadrut representative and pointed out that the Mandatory Government had no unemployment insurance schemes, forcing the Histadrut to establish its own, without government assistance. She refrained from dealing with political issues and dealt almost exclusively with economic and social matters, describing in detail the work of the Histadrut and its many endeavors.<sup>36</sup>

On February 4, 1937, she informed the Secretariat of the Va'ad Hapoel that she agreed to go to America to float the "Nachshon" shares. "To come to America and to speak of this goal—the conquest of the sea, Jewish shipping, Tel Aviv harbor—this activity will surely create a broad echo. When I was asked if I was prepared to go to America for this purpose, I said I was ready. This does not mean that I can vouch for the sum required but I am ready for this work because I believe this action will succeed".<sup>37</sup> In mid-February she boarded an Italian vessel to Italy, took the train to London and sailed to New York from Southampton, arriving there in early March. In her first report she noted that her mission was not as simple as she had thought. She came in the midst of the annual United Palestine Appeal and other Jewish and Zionist appeals and had to fight for her right to sell shares in "Nachshon". Her expectation was to raise 200,000 dollars, an astronomical sum for the time, taking into account that America had not recovered from the depression. She stressed that this was an investment guaranteed by the Workers Bank of the Histadrut. As Remez anticipated, this struck a chord among some American Jews.

She argued that "Nachshon" must be seen to be a profitable company in order to raise more funds. She also justified this cause on class and national

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<sup>36</sup> Martin Gilbert, *Exile and Return*, London, 1978, p. 173.

<sup>37</sup> Secretariat of the Va'ad Hapoel, 4 February 1937, p. 43.

grounds. She attempted to excite the imagination of her audiences by talking of the great day when a Jewish ship would sail into the harbor of the first Jewish city—Tel Aviv. She was at her best in face-to-face meetings and was able to sell some 15,000 shares, which netted 30,000 dollars. Among those who opposed the entire scheme was the anti-Zionist Socialist Movement called the “Bund” who were raising funds to help Polish Jews and mocked the idea of a Jewish steamship company. In her reports, Golda noted the growing influence of the Communist party mainly on American intellectuals and that many Jews fell under its influence. The Communists were using all methods to gain influence. As usual, she painted the situation in black and white. Eventually she was able to sell shares worth 150,000 dollars. The funds were used to buy a passenger ship and a few fishing vessels and laid the foundation for Jewish shipping in Palestine.<sup>38</sup> One discordant note was struck by Ben-Gurion, who thought she was wasting her time and talent. He felt that the Labor Movement must recruit as many members as possible in order to have a say in the forthcoming Zionist Congress due to be held in Zurich in the summer of 1937. In his diary he noted that “if the Jewish people have any political weight anywhere, it is in America”. He regretted that Golda was busy selling “Nachshon” shares; although important, he wrote, “but the selling of Shekels (membership dues in the World Zionist Organization) for the coming Zionist Congress is more important”.<sup>39</sup>

On July 7, 1937, the Royal Commission issued its report. For the first time, a British commission recommended the partition of Palestine into an Arab state to be linked with Trans-Jordan and a Jewish state which would mainly consist of the densely Jewish populated areas of the coastal plains, the Plain of Sharon, the Valley of Jezreel and certain parts of the Galilee. The rest of the country, including Jerusalem, would remain under British control. The envisioned partition plan would have given the Jewish State some 2,000 square miles, the Arabs and the British retaining an area of some 8,000 square miles. The Jews were thus offered 25 % of the territory of mandated Palestine.

As anticipated, the proposal unleashed a stormy debate in the Yishuv and among its supporters abroad. Those who favored the idea argued that here was an opportunity to create a national base that would absorb hundreds of thousands of Jews trying to escape from Nazi Germany and for the first time since the destruction of the Second Temple the Jews would be masters of their own fate. They would build an army, establish institutions of statehood and exercise sovereignty, even if only on a sliver of territory. The opponents said that partition would not

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38 Secretariat of the Va’ad Hapoel, 6 August 1936, pp. 106–108; 16 September 1937, p. 20.

39 Ben-Gurion, *Memories*, Vol. IV, Tel Aviv, 1974, pp. 192–193.



solve the problem. The tiny state would be at the mercy of its Arab neighbors and besides, how could the Zionist Organization allow Britain to so blatantly renege on their promises and commitments embodied in the Balfour Declaration and the Mandate. Weizmann, Ben-Gurion, Remez and Golomb headed the camp that was prepared to accept the partition plan. They felt this could be the last chance for the Jews to obtain a state of their own. Time was running out for European Jews and a shelter must be found at once to deal with the refugees clamoring to leave Germany. Among the opponents were Berl, Tabenkin, Ben-Aharon, Shaul Avigur and Golda Meyerson.

The issue came up for decision at the Zionist Congress. In the general debate, speaking in Yiddish, Golda expressed her views in a forceful and emotional manner which impressed the delegates. By doing so she was defying Ben-Gurion and Remez and thus prepared to risk her future political career if her position was not accepted. But she felt the issue was fundamental and involved principles and not political convenience or a blind support of the party line. There was no party line as the Mapai leadership was split on the matter. Her speech is worth quoting at length:

We forget Zionist basics. One of these tenets says that we need every corner of Palestine, not because we like it but because it is imperative for our development. Secondly, many experts proved that pieces of land in Palestine were uncultivable. We showed that the mountainous areas can be cultivated. We revived the land said by many experts to be not cultivable. Thirdly, we know there are many Arabs living in Palestine. Nevertheless, we always said that all Jews who desire or are forced to come to Palestine must go there without violating the rights of the Arabs living there. We must remember these tenets.

I was shocked when I heard how good Jews speak of the great joy that for the first time in our history we are getting a Jewish State. In truth, we are being given nothing. Our land is being stolen from us. We were never given anything. Moreover we were not even left in peace to work. We are afraid that there will be a Jewish State with all the attributes of sovereignty, such as League of Nations representation, ambassadors to various countries etc. But what and who will they represent? Surely we are highly enthusiastic when we think of the possibility of true self-determination, when we think of the possibility of being masters of our own house... It was said that borders are not eternal, they can change. Surely, there shall be a time when there will be no borders between nations and countries. But for the time being we live in an era of borders and zones that can be changed only through war. We were told about the transferring of Arabs to other places. Have the Arabs agreed? All this talk is self-delusion. No doubt, it would be fair and honest if the Arabs, rich in land and in countries, could cede Palestine to us. But for this we need their consent and goodwill. Have the reports of other commissions been better than this? Was there then an alternative? We have only one alternative, to reject this proposal, to mobilize Jewish forces and international justice on our side.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Protocols of the 20<sup>th</sup> Zionist Congress, 1937, p. 148; see Shmuel Dotan, *The Debate over Partition in the Mandate Era*, Jerusalem, 1980, p. 122; p. 151.

A year later she elaborated on the theme of transfer of Arabs from Palestine, saying that she would agree to Arabs leaving Palestine and that her conscience would be absolutely clean. But a question remained—was it a practical and realistic possibility? She thought that a freely implemented transfer of a population would never happen and that an imposed transfer was similar to efforts to change borders by force, which meant war.<sup>41</sup>

Her attitude to the partition was a culmination of her thoughts on the Arab-Jewish conflict which would be her basic theme until she made her last speech in September 1978. The only alternatives were either the Arabs or the Jews, there was no third way. Since the Arabs did not intend to leave of their own free will, and since they would never accept an independent Jewish state in Palestine, let alone negotiate directly with the Jews over their departure from there, “there is no one to talk to”. Her conclusion was simple: the Jews had to decide their own policy irrespective of what the Arabs would do. In this speech she avoided references to historic and biblical rights and did not even use the term “historic catastrophe” used by others who opposed partition. She argued more from a pragmatic sense. On this occasion she deviated from her normal way of avoiding confrontation and seeking consensus. She felt the issue was crucial to the future of the entire Zionist effort, so she was willing to take chances and state her views clearly.

Her views of the Arab Question were firmly fixed at this stage and would not change for the next forty years. Arabs make decisions not “on the basis of what is good for them, but on the basis of what is bad for us”, she often said. Although the Arabs lived next to the Jews, the psychological distance between the Zionist leaders and the Palestinian Arabs leaders was unbridgeable. Golda had no contact with them. One of the few who negotiated with them was Ben-Gurion. Another who understood them well was Moshe Sharett, who spoke Arabic fluently. Golda’s conviction of the righteousness of the Zionist cause was so absolute that she could never come to terms with the idea that the emerging Palestinian Arab nationalism might also have similar ideas regarding independence, nationhood and Arab sovereignty over Palestine. As she had no experience with Arabs, she could only apply to them what she knew of the struggle of the Jews, which was: the whole world is against us. She never studied the issue in depth and failed to understand that the Palestinian Arabs, whose fate was taken up by neighboring Arab countries, were governed by different values and expectations. She could not conceive of the possibility that the Arabs feared the Jews as much as the Jews feared them, and above all, dreaded being expelled from Palestine, for which both national independence movements were vying so desperately.

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41 David Ben-Gurion, *On the Ways of our Policy*, Tel Aviv, 1938, pp. 122–123.

The Congress did not resolve the issue. It left the decision to the Zionist Executive, headed by Ben-Gurion, for future negotiations with the British Government. In any case, the chances for partition were nil from the start, since the Arabs, both Palestinians and neighboring countries, totally rejected the idea. On the eve of the closing of the Congress, a group of 150 delegates who opposed partition decided to continue to oppose it. Golda was among the more outspoken. She was very emphatic:

The partition plan is a plan of compromise at our expense. Partition is a disaster for the Jewish people. Let us assume that in the next fifteen years we shall do our utmost and bring two million Jews to Palestine. Could we say that we have to think only in the framework of the next fifteen years and what happens after that does not affect us? I want a Jewish State, but I don't want to see the day when I or my son will have to tell a Jew knocking at the gates of that state there is no room for him.<sup>42</sup>

In the heated discussion on partition, she lashed out at Ben-Gurion asking him what would happen when this little state would have three million Jews. He replied: what would happen after three million Jews would come, we shall see later. The future generations will look after themselves. We must look after this generation.

Years later she had the grace and honesty to admit that on the issue of partition she and her friends were wrong and that “Ben-Gurion in his greater wisdom, arguing that any state is better than none at all, was right”. In a December 1977 interview on Israel Television she again said that Ben-Gurion had been right: “I have no doubt...Had the partition scheme been shelved because of us, the nay-sayers, I would not be able to sleep nights on account of the responsibility for what happened in Europe...”<sup>43</sup>

But the partition proposal never got off the ground. The British Government, now terrified over the looming prospect of another world war and realizing that in such an eventuality they would need Arab support and sympathy, decided to appoint another commission. This one, headed by the aptly named Sir John Woodhead, was to investigate the feasibility of partition and the chances for its implementation. It quickly reached the conclusion that the imposition of partition would require a large number of British troops, unavailable at the time. London once again became the central arena for the Zionist efforts. Golda went there with Remez and Berl Locker, another Zionist leader, to revive the work of the Histadrut's office in England. In London she realized that any further discussion

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<sup>42</sup> Michael Bar-Zohar, *Ben-Gurion: A Political Biography*, Vol. I, Tel Aviv, 1977, pp. 366–367.

<sup>43</sup> Meir, *My Life*, p. 116.

on partition was premature, verging on the academic. She understood very well the remarks of the Colonial Secretary Malcolm MacDonald who said later that the Jews had nowhere to go, they could not turn to Hitler. The Arabs could and some threatened to do so.

In the summer of 1938 Golda underwent one of her more humiliating and depressing experiences, whose traumatic impact on her would last to her dying day. President Franklin D. Roosevelt convened an international conference to discuss the refugee issue, meaning what to do with the growing number of Jewish refugees fleeing Germany. The conference was held in the French spa of Evian on Lake Lemman and Golda attended as an observer representing the Histadrut. Other Jewish leaders in attendance were Arthur Ruppin of the Jewish Agency Executive and Nahum Goldmann, the president of the World Jewish Congress. The British Government agreed to attend on condition that Palestine as a possible haven for refugees would be totally excluded from the agenda. The conference was a sad farce, when one delegate after another rose to explain why his country had no room for refugees. Golda could not believe her ears when representatives of “small” countries such as Brazil made this silly assertion. The only country willing to admit Jews was the Dominican Republic. Few Jews ever heard of it, let alone settled there. The very few who did felt it was close enough to the United States, their real goal. Many delegates claimed that Jewish refugees in their countries would only will enhance anti-Semitism and add to unemployment. A day after the conference ended as expected with no visible results, Golda held a press conference at the Royal Hotel. The “Basler National Zeitung” reported that a lone woman faced a large number of curious journalists and answered their questions with grace. When asked about her thoughts, she replied: “I have one ideal in front of my eyes. This is one thing I want to see happening before I die and that is that my people will never require declarations of support”.<sup>44</sup> In her report to the Histadrut Executive she said:

The worse thing was the appearance of various Jewish organizations, which was pathetic. Thirty-five Jewish bodies before a committee of Goyim, none of them willing to have Jews in their country. Roosevelt may have had a decent attitude and goodwill. He proclaimed the conference but did not prepare it. There was no agenda, no program. Taylor (the American Ambassador to the Vatican) invited the various governments (to attend), but he did not send a statesman but a well-meaning factory owner. The key figure was (James) McDonald (the future first American Ambassador to Israel). So far the United States granted only 27,000 entry permits and I fear this will be the most they will give. The meeting of the Jewish organizations with (the British delegate) Lord Winterman was appalling. The entire

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<sup>44</sup> Secretariat of the Va’ad Hapoel, 21 July 1938, p. 16; see also Yigal Lossin, *Pillar of Fire—Chapters in Zionist History*, Jerusalem, 1982, p. 247.

conversation lasted 14 minutes. Goldmann, Ruppin and I spoke. We told him what we felt needed to be said. One should not assume that recent developments gave him the opportunity not to mention Palestine. He came with the clear intention not to do so.<sup>45</sup>

Back in America she sold 30,000 more “Nachshon” shares, 26,000 of which were fully paid, realizing 28,800 Palestine pounds. Golda was convinced that she could have done better were it not for the fact that she could not show concrete progress in the shape of vessels purchased and had to rely on her persuasive powers. In America, she negotiated with a Canadian company for the purchase of two passenger liners at the cost of 100,000 pounds each. But there were doubts expressed in the Histadrut and Jewish Agency that these sums were huge and it was decided to concentrate on freighters. She recalled later that for weeks and months all she thought about were ships and indeed, she became quite an expert on the matter. On her way back to Palestine she stopped off in Norway to inspect ships.<sup>46</sup> But for her pains she was not even considered by Remez and other Histadrut and Agency leaders as a suitable candidate to head the “Nachshon” Company or even serve on its Board of Directors. That may have hurt her although there is no reference to this in her memoirs. She was pleased that for her efforts Berl Katznelson suggested that she be given the title “Captain Golda”.<sup>47</sup>

What were her impressions of American Jewry in the late 1930's? By now she was considered an expert on this crucial community and this is what she had to say about them in a July 1937 report to the Va'ad Hapoel: “I discovered a new America—more Jewish. I have never seen Jews in such a state of fear and anxiety as I have now... Every Jew understands that something has happened in America but they have not yet reached any conclusions. The assimilated wealthy say that the catastrophe (of European Jewry) is so great, that nothing can be done. Others say they should help the Jews of Europe and Palestine...” In recent months, she noted, the situation had somewhat improved but there was no work. American Jews found it hard to get employment. The youth attended colleges but faced the dilemma what to study. If they wanted to study medicine, they were not admitted. If admitted, what would they do? As an engineer or chemist there was hardly a chance for Jews to be accepted by private enterprises and by the Government as well. Hence they turned to the Communists.<sup>48</sup> In this and in other reports she often generalized. But she read the situation correctly. The Depression had not abated. She noted of course that despite the difficulties, very few American Jews

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<sup>45</sup> Ehud Avriel, *Open the Gates*, Tel Aviv, 1976, pp. 30–31.

<sup>46</sup> Secretariat of the Va'ad Hapoel, 13 April 1939, pp. 7–20.

<sup>47</sup> Shapira, Berl, p. 706.

<sup>48</sup> Secretariat of the Va'ad Hapoel, 21 July 1938, p. 15.

were considering immigrating to Palestine. That country was not a viable option for them.

Her first decade in the Histadrut was coming to an end. She would look back with much satisfaction on her personal achievements, rising, as it were, from the position of Co-Secretary General of the Women's Labor Council to that of a full-fledged member of the Executive Committee and member of its inner Secretariat. She had grown up in an organization that was in a constant state of growth, whose membership stood at 112,000 by the end of the 1930's. Almost one in four Jews in the Yishuv were involved in the Histadrut with dependants added, the figure was much higher. She was now a major player in Mapai, had successfully represented the party, the Labor Movement and the Histadrut in various international gatherings and acquired growing stature and a reputation as a tough, no-nonsense negotiator, prepared to fight for her principles but doing it in a manner designed to avoid unnecessary confrontation. By then, her views on many issues—social, economic and political, were consolidated and she would cling to them until her dying day. On rare occasions she admitted to making mistakes. Her self-righteousness would often offend some, her piousness others. Her lifestyle was the talk of many in Tel Aviv. Her relationship with Remez and Shazar were a known fact, which did not in any way stop her steady climb to the top. She could be relied on to do a good and steady job, said her elders and betters, and this was what counted. She was always ready to undertake new and additional tasks, responsibilities and the authority that went along with these assignments. She never turned down an assignment claiming she was too busy, had no spare time or that it lay outside her jurisdiction. Her ten years of apprenticeship were over. Golda had graduated with honors. When the Second World War erupted and the Jewish people were to face their worst ordeal ever, she at least was ready to deal with the new reality as best as she could.

## 6 War and Holocaust (1939–1945)

The Yishuv's leadership faced 1939 with mounting fear. German Jews had on November 9, 1938 experienced the infamous "Crystal Night" in which hundreds of Jewish synagogues, institutions and shops were set on fire in most German cities and thousands of Jews were sent to concentration camps, an omen of what the future held for European Jewry. Those who managed to flee Germany found themselves knocking on the doors of Western European, North American and Latin American nations consulates seeking shelter. Hundreds of German Jews who attempted to escape to the United States on board the S.S. St. Louis were not allowed to land in Havana and later in Miami and returned to Europe, many of them would perish in the Holocaust. Pressure on the Yishuv's leadership to "do something" was building, but there was very little they could do save write letters of protest to the British Government in London and its representatives in Palestine.

In early 1939, Palestine was still reeling from three years of Arab rebellion, but the situation was gradually returning to some normalcy. The British army finally restored a semblance of order, while the Hagannah adopted a more aggressive policy. A number of units trained by British Army Captain Orde Wingate launched series of attacks on Arab villages in the Valley of Jezreel and Lower Galilee, safeguarding existing Jewish settlements and those which were established during the riots. The Yishuv was in the midst of a heated debate how best to react to Arab attacks. The elected Yishuv leadership opted to continue the policy known as "self restraint", which meant that the Hagannah would not retaliate on attacks against Jews apart from the raids conducted by the field units trained by Wingate. The Revisionists rejected this policy and in 1937 set up their own underground fighting organization called Irgun Zvai Leumi (IZL: National Military Organization). Their policy was to attack Arab gangs. The Jewish Agency and the Histadrut objected to this policy, fearing it would cause unnecessary confrontation with the British Government and endanger the Yishuv's security, still very much dependent on the British army and police. In 1938, an Irgun member, Shlomo Ben Yossef, was captured by the British police as he was about to hurl a hand grenade on an Arab bus traveling on the Safed-Rosh Pina Road. He was tried and condemned to hang. His execution aroused much anger in the entire Yishuv, irrespective of the logic of his act. The lines were being drawn. The largest and official underground body, the Hagannah, was answerable to the Jewish Agency, the Histadrut, the Labor Movement, the kibbutzim and moshavim, while the Irgun, and from 1940 another splinter body, the Fighters for the Freedom of Israel (Lechi), derived their strength from recent new immigrants from Poland, the majority graduates of Beitar, the Revisionist Youth Movement, who were opposed to the self-restraint policy of the organized Yishuv.

While the Arab rebellion was still taking place, the Yishuv devised its own response: it continued to create more facts on the ground by establishing a large number of kibbutzim and moshavim in strategic parts of the country and the map of Palestine was being redrawn as more Jewish settlements were put up. The Yishuv was slowly expanding southwards, towards the Negev, to Upper Galilee near the Israel-Lebanon border and the Beisan Valley. The ideology and strategy behind this push were simple: the areas settled by Jews would one day determine the future borders of the Jewish State. The recommendations of the Peel Commission bolstered this thesis. A key decision was not to settle in what was already known as the West Bank of the Jordan River. A large and dense Arab population dictated this strategy and the thinking was that in the future this area would become part of an Arab state incorporated into Trans-Jordan. The settlement effort was costly and required very detailed planning and organization, provided by the Jewish Agency's Settlement Department under the protection of the Hagannah. As ever, the Histadrut was called upon to contribute its share. To finance the growing needs, as well as to provide unemployment compensation, the Histadrut was considering obtaining a large loan abroad. In March 1939, Golda told the Executive Committee: "We must do everything to charge a special Histadrut committee with the task of drawing up plans for settlements and defense". Although she normally feared large-scale preparations, she added: "We must start acting at once by sending a delegation abroad to get a loan. We know that during times of economic or political crisis we are here and this has an enormous value in itself".<sup>1</sup>

In the course of 1939 it was becoming evident that Britain was devising a new policy for Palestine. The Jews had no choice but to rely on the British to protect them from the Arabs. The Arabs had the option of allying with Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy. The British realized they needed the Arabs more than the Jews and there would be an immediate need to appease the Arabs. The Woodhead Commission, which was sent to Palestine to investigate the feasibility of the Peel partition scheme, issued a report saying that partition was not feasible. This gladdened the Arabs and those Jews opposed to partition. The Yishuv sensed that something was brewing behind closed doors as scraps of information were accumulating. The diplomatic struggle was waged in London by Weizmann, Ben-Gurion and Sharett. In March 1939, the British Government arranged another conference in St. James Palace in London in a last-ditch effort to seek a solution to the Palestine question. As the Arabs refused to sit at the same table with the Jews, the British held separate meetings with the Jewish and Arab delegations. Naturally, this

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<sup>1</sup> Erez, Remez, p. 361.



effort failed. Meanwhile the Yishuv leadership instructed the Histadrut to carry on the settlement and immigration activities and expand industry and Jewish presence to more parts of the country.

The British administration was apparently not impressed with the Yishuv's settlement and immigration efforts. In May 1939, they finally issued the new policy statement called the MacDonald White Paper, named after the colonial secretary. It contained draconian measures which, if fully implemented, would have doomed the Jewish community of Palestine to a tiny minority at the mercy of the local Arabs. Immigration would be curtailed to 75,000 for the next five years and then additional Jews would be allowed only with the consent of the Arabs. The country was to be divided into a number of zones in most of which Jews would not be allowed to purchase land. The Mandate would remain in force for the next ten years, to be followed by granting of independence to the country with majority rule.

The blow was very heavy. On the face of it, this could be the end of the national Jewish homeland, the end of the hopes and of the dreams, and coming at the time when European Jews were already trapped. There was no point in challenging this policy at the League of Nations as that international body virtually ceased to exist. The United States could not be relied upon as it showed very little interest in Palestine. No one thought of turning to the Soviet Union, then anti-Zionist and often anti-Semitic, already considering entering into an agreement with Nazi Germany that would be signed on August 23, 1939. The Yishuv would have to grit its teeth and rely on its own strength, small as it was.

A few weeks prior to the publication of the White Paper, Golda wrote an article for the bulletin of the Women's Labor Council. The very few who read it were impressed with the way she presented the situation. Her conclusions were that the Yishuv would have to rely on its own strength, weak as it was, knowing that since 1936 it showed its ability to defend itself. She stressed the need to build the homeland to absorb thousands of persecuted Jewish refugee children and adults.<sup>2</sup> This was a rare case when she felt the need to write an article. She told her son Menachem that writing it helped her overcome the oppressive feeling she had. This was her battle cry, regrettably read only by a small number of women.

One day after the issuing of the White Paper, on May 18, 1939, she participated in a mass demonstration in Tel Aviv alongside Aranne and Eshkol. The British were unimpressed by this show. In some places they dispersed the demonstrations by force. The Yishuv was powerless to resist the new policy in spite of an

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<sup>2</sup> For the English version of the article see Henry Christman, ed., *This is Our Strength*, New York, 1962, pp. 1–7.

impressive growth in its numbers and infrastructure. Meanwhile the leaders were preparing for the mass exodus to Europe, to attend the 21<sup>st</sup> Zionist Congress due to be held in Geneva at the end of August. On the way to Geneva, Golda and Remez stopped off in London seeking additional financial resources for “Nachshon”. Remez noted in his diary that Golda told him that when she was in America few believed there could be Jewish sailors. We are ready, the capitalists said, to participate in purchasing Hebrew ships flying the Hebrew flag, but Jewish seamen—that was too much.<sup>3</sup>

The Zionist Congress was held under the clouds of the coming war. Across the border in France air raid and blackout drills were being held. There was a very heavy feeling in the Congress hall. It was evident to many of those attending that this would be their last Congress. Austria and Czechoslovakia had already fallen to the Nazis and their Jewish communities were deemed lost. The majority was now concerned over the fate of Eastern European Jewry, mainly in Poland. Golda and her associates pondered aloud how contact could be maintained with the comrades in Poland. No one could have foreseen that when the next Zionist Congress would convene in 1946, a third of the Jewish people would have perished in the Holocaust.

It was somewhat surprising that Golda spoke once at the Congress and dealt (in Yiddish) with a marginal issue—the granting of a privileged representation to the Yishuv in the Congress. She felt that while the people of the Yishuv were not better Jews than those in other countries, its very existence was the *raison d’être* of the Zionist Movement. When there would be more than a million Jews in Palestine, they should give up this privilege. “We propose to you in this difficult time for Zionism that the frontline is Palestine and it faces enormous tasks. Don’t weaken the Yishuv by denying those rights you have always granted it”.<sup>4</sup> It is not clear why she chose to deal with this matter. But her main thoughts focused on what would happen to Zionism, the Labor Movement and the Histadrut in the coming war. She assessed correctly that the center of power would move from Europe to America, and since she knew America, she had mixed feelings. Would American Jews understand the new position history had bestowed on them and would they rise to the occasion, and was the entire matter of Palestine really that important for most of the members of the American Jewish community?

In any case, on August 25, 1939, the heads of the Histadrut Executive Committee present in Geneva met to discuss the situation. Golda was asked to return to Palestine at once, even by air. Ideas were discussed regarding the need to link

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<sup>3</sup> Erez, Remez, p. 378.

<sup>4</sup> Protocols of the 21<sup>st</sup> Zionist Congress, Jerusalem, 1940, p. 190; Erez, Remez, p. 380.

the Histadrut's campaign in America to finance the illegal (from a British point of view) immigration. Golda naively thought that 20,000 American Jews could be mobilized to come to Palestine and help the beleaguered Yishuv. She estimated, without any solid evidence, that masses of young American Jews would flock to Palestine. "We are now paying the price, for at the time we did not organize the Chalutz in America. We can mobilize Aliyah B (illegal immigration) in America under the slogan of the need for defending the country. Asking for help for the needy and poor will not work. We also have to prepare plans either for war or for peace. In both cases we shall have to preserve the Histadrut's campaign".<sup>5</sup> Her words on America were exaggerated and far from reality. As always, the possibility of her going to America was raised again. Remez said that it was up to her to decide. Of course, she chose to return to Palestine, leaving the work in America to others.

On September 1, Hitler invaded Poland. Two days later Britain and France declared war. Being a British mandate, Palestine was now a partner to the British war effort. On that day, the Jewish Agency representatives in Geneva managed to book passage for the heads of the Yishuv on one of the last passenger ships to sail from Marseilles to the Middle East. They traveled on board the S.S. City of Cairo to Alexandria and made their way to Palestine by train. The next day, Golda appeared before the Executive Committee and demanded mobilization of funds to help the unemployed and even called for relief works. This time she sounded demagogic: "We have to take from wealthy Jews what they owe". She felt there was need to bolster the fund for the unemployed, but she objected to once again taxing those five thousand Histadrut members who earned more than ten pounds a month. She asked what this tax would contribute. Her advice was to organize soup kitchens for children of Histadrut members, all children, those of the employed and the unemployed. Let them all eat the same food in the same kitchens. It would be cheaper than cooking at home.<sup>6</sup> No one took her seriously. There were no Histadrut kitchens in any case. Her proposal was so complicated to administer and she showed no attempt to think about it in an orderly manner.

During the first months of the war Golda was in charge of the Histadrut's departments dealing with the Sick Fund and the unemployment funds that were given the Hebrew titles of "Matsiv", "Mishan", "Meshek" as well as the funds for the handicapped. She threw herself into work on the Mifde D and aimed at mobilizing the unheard-of sum of hundreds of thousands of pounds. Her main focus was on this fund and she found herself arguing with workers' committees who

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<sup>5</sup> Secretariat of the Zionist Actions Committee, Geneva, 25 August 1939, pp. 13–21.

<sup>6</sup> Secretariat of the Va'ad Hapoel, 11 September 1939, p. 65.

demanded improvement in working conditions but refused to help in the Mifde and even sabotaged its work. Remez noted “that Golda is very tired but seems to draw energy from every penny that brings the figure close to 100,000”.<sup>7</sup>

She had many other preoccupations during those hard times when the Mandatory government decided to activate the White Paper edicts dealing with the sale of land to Jews. These entailed demonstrations which led to arrests of Histadrut members. Golda and Remez met the Chief Secretary of the Mandatory regime and told him: “You have taken 95% of our land”. He retorted: “All that the Histadrut achieved in this country was possible under the protection of the empire”. He added that while the Jews and the Arabs were the parties concerned, the Empire makes the decisions.<sup>8</sup> For him the Arab-Jewish struggle was like a football match in which he was the umpire. Unemployment continued to be a major bane although many young Jews began to enlist in the British army. In June 1940 a number of unemployed broke into the Histadrut headquarters on Allenby Street in Tel Aviv. Their leaders were later tried before a Mapai tribunal, and in the course of the trial Golda stated: “Those who attacked me are activists like myself. Their children are not hungry. They did not share their last piece of bread with those who suffer. Why are they allowed to speak on their behalf and turn their anger at me, when I am forced to take a false position of defending the interests of authority”?<sup>9</sup> Such a stand against the unemployed would be her lot on a number of occasions during the war. The Histadrut and its leaders were easy targets for demonstrators who could not vent their anger at the British Government or the Jewish Agency in Jerusalem. Some were incited by Communists.

In June 1940 the situation worsened. Britain was about to abandon France and salvage the remnants of her troops from Europe. France, Belgium, Holland, Denmark and Norway had already fallen to the Nazis. Italy joined Germany and entered the war. The fall of France meant that the pro-Nazi Vichy Government now controlled Syria and Lebanon. Suddenly the war came close to Palestine. Golda already mentioned the possibility of mass evacuation of children from dangerous areas prone to air raids such as Tel Aviv and Haifa, but the idea was never implemented.<sup>10</sup>

Another issue on the agenda was the mobilization of young Palestinian Jews to the British army. In early July 1940, the Histadrut Executive Committee held emergency discussions on the subject of the volunteering of Histadrut members to two auxiliary brigades set up by the British Army. Thousands of additional young

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<sup>7</sup> Erez, Remez, p. 400.

<sup>8</sup> Secretariat of the Va'ad Hapoel, 10 March 1940, pp. 4–5.

<sup>9</sup> Shapira, Berl, pp. 619–620.

<sup>10</sup> Secretariat of the Va'ad Hapoel, 27 June 1940.

Jews were mobilized for service duties in the Royal Air Force and the Royal Navy. The call up was made by the Jewish Agency and the National Council, wishing to prove to the Mandatory government that the Yishuv was seriously participating in the war effort. The call-up created a major dilemma for the Yishuv. On the one hand it was an important step for the mobilization of the Yishuv's power to defend the country as well as a demonstration of active participation in the war against the mutual enemies—the Nazis. In this manner, thousands of young men would also receive military training that could be very useful for the future. But it became evident that the British were mobilizing young Jews individually and not collectively and had no intention of setting up separate Jewish units with their own banners and commanders. Another fear was that of weakening the Haganah, exposing the Yishuv to danger on the part of the local Arabs. Some argued that the British had intended to weaken the Haganah all along. At the end of 1939, they arrested 43 Haganah members caught training under the command of Moshe Dayan. They were charged with possession of illegal weapons and were condemned to ten years in Acre Prison. The Yishuv wondered—at the time when young men were needed, while it was being asked to mobilize others for service in the British Army, some of the best men were in prison. But the general mood was that service in the British Army comes first, only then would the Yishuv have the moral right to make demands of the victorious powers at the end of the war. Above all it was unthinkable that Jews would not fight the Nazis. It was Ben-Gurion who coined the phrase: “We shall fight Hitler as though there is no White Paper and the White Paper as though there is no Hitler”.

Golda's stand was, as always, pragmatic: “We face the task of not doing this with enthusiasm, but to provide an important kernel...that their appearance will be important and they will do important things. We also have to consider with all seriousness not to weaken what we have now and to increase our inner strength, but we have to provide the men as necessary”.<sup>11</sup> She worried about more mundane matters. What happened when someone enlisted in the British army and the landlord evicted his family? If they did so while the man was at home, imagine what they will do when he was away. She expressed concern for the families of the soldiers. “True, we face terrible dangers, but while readying ourselves, we cannot avoid daily matters, and all of us who are engaged in these matters, will deal with preparations for the emergency”.<sup>12</sup>

The war impacted on another facet. The contact between Palestinian and European Jewry was almost totally cut off, placing the Histadrut in a serious sit-

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<sup>11</sup> Secretariat of the Va'ad Hapoel, 4 July 1940, p. 68.

<sup>12</sup> Secretariat of the Va'ad Hapoel, 18 July 1940.

uation. Not only did some of its financial resources dry out, but the Yishuv saw itself, together with the Jewish Agency, as the central organization to help rescue European Jewry. At the end of 1940, news arrived of a new process that forewarned the beginning of the destruction of European Jews. Golda was among those who received current news on the state of Jews in occupied Europe. She also met regularly with those who were able to escape Europe and arrive in Palestine in various ways.<sup>13</sup> Following the death of Dov Hoz in a car accident, she became the head of the Histadrut's Political Department. One of her main roles was to coordinate activities with the Jewish Agency Political Department, the National Council and the Mandatory Government. In this capacity she hosted negotiations in her apartment between the Haganah head Eliyahu Golomb and the Commander of the IZL, David Raziell, over the need to unify all the underground bodies for the duration of the war. But Ben-Gurion vetoed the idea and the talks lapsed.<sup>14</sup>

The British restrictions on land purchases were now implemented and the Yishuv found itself between the anvil and the deep blue sea. As European Jewry was on the verge of annihilation, British brutality grew. It was obvious that the Yishuv had to look towards American Jews as their last resort. In a Mapai Central Committee discussion on April 9, 1940, Golda followed a long list of speakers. In her typical simplistic manner, she said: "I am against theoretical discussions. I propose that we discuss concrete action and first of all—our work in America".<sup>15</sup> In August this body came back to the subject of ties with American Jewry. Eliezer Kaplan, the Jewish Agency's treasurer, a cold, realistic man not given to panic who weighed every word, said he despaired of obtaining help from American Jews. Golda dissented and said that "in America we can succeed only if we add concrete matters to the theory and the Histadrut campaign is a good example. It succeeded because miraculously we succeeded in joining these two things. In addition to presenting concrete demands to meet our needs, we also educated a large public and endowed it with certain Zionist education".<sup>16</sup> She criticized the heads of the United Jewish Appeal (UJA) who regularly opposed accepting emissaries from Palestine. "Every year they tell us this. It is convenient for them that a respectable English-speaking Jewish leader will travel from one city to another and speak of the need to help suffering Jews, rather than to have Zionist emissaries who will talk Zionism. I pray for the day when we will have the courage to launch a separate Zionist appeal in America, because I see in it the main conduit

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<sup>13</sup> Dina Porat, *Trapped Leadership*, Tel Aviv, 1986, pp. 27–31.

<sup>14</sup> Aviezer Golan and Shlomo Nakdimon, *Begin*, Jerusalem, 1978, p. 64.

<sup>15</sup> Mapai Central Committee, 9 April 1940, quoted by Allon Gal, Ben-Gurion, *Towards a Jewish State*, Sede Boker, 1985, p. 57.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 94–95.

for Zionist-educational work”. All her anger at the United Jewish Appeal burst out. As a Histadrut emissary in America, she knew well that the Appeal was controlled by the local community federations and large percentage of the funds remained in the communities for local needs. Only a small fraction was earmarked for work in Palestine and Europe. She knew well that the Appeal turned mainly to wealthy Jews of Central European origins and the part played by Eastern European Jews was minimal. The Appeal leaders, many of whom were German Jews, determined the allocation of the funds, and since most of them were not Zionists, she knew what their order of priorities would be. Her negative attitude to the United Jewish Appeal would emerge once again ten years later, when she fought for the creation of a separate fundraising organization that would bypass the Appeal and supported wholeheartedly the establishment of Israel Bonds, a development resisted by the United Jewish Appeal and even by some Israeli leaders.

The war was nearing Palestine. Italian planes bombed Tel Aviv in September 1940. Greece and Crete fell to the Germans in April 1941. Among the thousands of British prisoners of war were hundreds of Jews from Palestine, among them Histadrut leaders and activists Yitzhak Ben-Aharon and Yossef Almogi. In Jerusalem, Moshe Sharett intensified his efforts to establish an independent Jewish unit in the framework of the British Army. As the situation worsened, the Hagannah headquarters decided to establish the Palmach, its permanently mobilized units. Golda supported the idea wholeheartedly: “We are speaking of the creation of a force, inasmuch as we can create a force, and in this case, a force that will remain here to defend the country”.<sup>17</sup> In the British military headquarters in Cairo, plans were drawn up in case Palestine fell to the Germans. In order to organize local resistance groups, the British decided to collaborate with the Hagannah, and released the 43 Acre prisoners and distributed weapons to Jewish settlements. Already at the time, a number of young men, members of the Hagannah and the newly created Palmach, were making their name. With some Golda would work in later years. They included Moshe Dayan, Yigal Allon, Yitzhak Rabin, Chaim Bar-Lev and David Elazar. In the future, they would play central roles in Israel. She adored the native-born Sabras “to whom hairsplitting is alien, they are as pure and simple as the sun over Palestine. For them things are simple, uncomplicated and clear. We are blessed with such youth who are ready to sacrifice their lives not for his specific kibbutz, or the entire Yishuv, but for each and every Jewish child and old people who wish to enter the country”.<sup>18</sup> She loved their healthy attitude to life and was glad to work with them as long as they were part and parcel of the

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<sup>17</sup> Secretariat of the Va'ad Hapoel, 29 April 1941, p. 112.

<sup>18</sup> Address at the 22<sup>nd</sup> Zionist Congress, Basel, December 1946; see also Meir, *My Life*, p. 146.

Labor Movement. All of them were graduates of the Zionist youth movements and lived in organized groups in kibbutzim and moshavim. She knew Moshe Dayan and Yitzhak Rabin from their childhood as she knew their parents well. In the family atmosphere of the Yishuv, such ties were important. In the future, when anyone sought to slander Rabin, she would say: “But he is the son of Rosa and Nehemiah”.

At the request of the British army, Palmach members participated in reconnaissance operations in Lebanon on the eve of the allied invasion of that country. In one of those operations, Moshe Dayan lost an eye. Twenty-three Palmach members were lost at sea when their boat disappeared in a mission to attack oil refineries in Tripoli in Lebanon. The commander of the IZL, David Raziell, was killed in action in Baghdad fighting against an anti-British uprising. But the underground groups did not attain unity because Ben-Gurion feared that the IZL and Lechi would undermine the morale and discipline of the Hagannah. He did not want discussions on the nature of the struggle and worried over the spread of right-wing nationalist ideology in the spirit of Jabotinsky. Above all he refused to award equal standing with the Hagannah to the IZL and Lechi. The latter was the official underground that obeyed the elected leadership of the Yishuv. The other two bodies became known as the Seceders (Haporshim).

When the Germans invaded the Soviet Union in June 1941, a new front opened and with it the hope that now that the Soviet Union was an ally in the struggle against Germany, contact could be established with Soviet Jewry, contact effectively lost since the 1920's. The idea appealed to the Yishuv leaders, many of whom still had nostalgic sentiments for the country of their birth in spite of the pogroms and persecution from which they had fled. In August 1941, an idea was broached in the Va'ad Hapoel—the Yishuv would send a medical team to Russia to assist the Soviet army and Jews in the war zones. Golda thought this should be undertaken together with American Jews: “There is political sense in that we appear before Soviet Jews, cut off from Judaism and Zionism, not alone, but with the involvement of American Jews”.<sup>19</sup> For that purpose, contact was also established with the British Labor Party. Under discussion was a team of six doctors and 24 nurses, all were Russian speakers. The key question was who would fund the team. Histadrut supporters in America were approached, but they showed little interest or enthusiasm, as did the British Labor Party. It was then proposed that the Histadrut Sick Fund would send the team, but no one could decide who would look after the families of the doctors and nurses. Eventually nothing came out of the idea. Members of the pro-Soviet Hashomer Ha'tsair party in the

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<sup>19</sup> Secretariat of the Va'ad Hapoel, 31 July 1941, p. 155.



Histadrut accused the Mapai leadership of not dealing with the matter seriously. Golda was furious:

I forcefully protest the right that Hashomer Ha'tsair members assume, not once or twice, to sit in a Supreme Court seat and judge, in the most possible objectivity, what is serious and what is not...What should the Va'ad Hapoel do that you will believe that it takes the matter seriously? By what right and privilege do you decide to become the final arbiter on the question of what is and what is not serious, what is proper and what is not? I protest and return to you the talk of seriousness. You can criticize, to say we are wrong, that there is another way, but to rule what is serious and what is not—what kind of criticism is this and what kind of talk is this?<sup>20</sup>

There were certain words that made her lose her temper and give a vitriolic response. Among them were: not serious, irresponsible, superficial. The people who first used these words were her husband and some family members who said that what she was doing was superficial. This time she responded to the words of Hashomer Ha'tsair. In July 1946, she would walk out of a room when the legendary Chaim Weizmann accused her, and others who shared her views, of being irresponsible. Her reaction was highly emotional, because she took it as an attack on her intellectual inferiority. No one would dare accuse Berl, Ben-Gurion or Remez of being irresponsible or superficial, but Golda was an easy target. Her self-confidence would erode when she heard these charges and her reaction was vitriolic and cynical. In retrospect, the entire matter of the medical mission to Russia was at best marginal, as the matter was not checked in advance with the Russians, who were supposed to receive the mission, or with the British, who were expected to allow the mission to leave the country. One wonders over the amount of time, energy and emotions invested in this futile effort.

Instead of the medical team, it was decided in September 1941 to establish a fund to help Soviet soldiers. Until November, the Histadrut raised 3,000 pounds in cash and 2,700 in pledges. In January 1942, 6,800 were raised, equivalent to 27,500 dollars—a respectable sum. The question arose how this money would be transferred to the Russians and what publicity would be given to this act. A cable was sent to the Soviet Government and a meeting was held in Ankara between the Jewish Agency representative in Turkey, Eliyahu Eilat, and the Soviet Ambassador to Turkey. The latter said that it was likely that “you will not get an answer to your cable”, and it was decided to wait for a few months.<sup>21</sup> In May 1942, the Soviets have not yet responded but announced they were ready to accept volunteers provided the volunteers assumed Soviet citizenship. In other words, it was clear the

<sup>20</sup> Secretariat of the Va'ad Hapoel, 18 September 1941.

<sup>21</sup> Secretariat of the Va'ad Hapoel, 29 January 1942, p. 24.

Soviets had no interest in any ties with the Histadrut. No wonder that Golda was deeply hurt and said: “The truth is so bitter and insulting”.<sup>22</sup> Hashomer Ha’tsair pressured the Histadrut to establish a League for the Soviet Union. Mapai’s heads objected; they rejected the Communist ideology whereas the Hashomer Ha’tsair was closer to this ideology. On the matter of the League, Golda said plainly: “The Soviet Government is not so naive. They know what they want. If they will conclude that they want to contact us, they will do so openly. We cannot delude ourselves or Russia. There is no practical value in this and no help to Russia”.<sup>23</sup> Mapai did not want the members of Hashomer Ha’tsair to increase their influence using the public sympathy for the Soviet Union to gain political capital.

In June 1941, Golda was elected to the Presidium of the Fifth Mapai Convention (with Eshkol) and in that summer Golda participated in the party’s ideological-educational effort initiated by Berl Katznelson called “Learning Months”. Golda ran the part of the seminar dealing with the Histadrut and lectured on this body. Among the students were Yigal Allon and Shimon Peres. In her talks on the Histadrut she shied away from complex ideological issues and spoke plainly of the tasks and challenges the organization faced, mainly unemployment and how to deal with the unemployed, and stated simply that “we cannot permit the shame of hungry children”.<sup>24</sup> She displayed a facet of her feminine sensitivity when she designated Sarah Zayt, Berl’s lady friend, as a stenographer.<sup>25</sup>

One of many examples for the Yishuv’s impotence in those days and what preoccupied the heads of the Histadrut was a discussion held in the Va’ad Hapoel secretariat on April 28, 1942. As Rommel’s armies were approaching Alexandria in Egypt, the German army was at the gates of Stalingrad and Japan occupied all of South-East Asia and threatened Australia, the subject under discussion was whether there should be a public holiday on May 1 or whether it would hurt the war effort. In her forthright manner, Golda spoke the simple truth: “We pretend as though we are working for the war effort, but in reality nothing is in our hands. The Government does not involve us in the war effort and we have to struggle for each expression of such an effort... we say: all that we do is good for the country. Strengthening the Yishuv’s power in this country is good not only for Jews, but yet we have to fight for each step”.<sup>26</sup> She supported calling off the holiday (“until I came to this country I did not know the taste of May 1”). Finally a compromise

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<sup>22</sup> Secretariat of the Va’ad Hapoel, 26 May 1942, p. 24.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. See also Benjamin Pinkus, *Special Relations: The Soviet Union and its Allies and their Relations with the Jewish People, Zionism and the State of Israel*, Sede Boker, 2007, pp. 115–126.

<sup>24</sup> Golda Meir, “On Mutual Aid in the Histadrut”, in Tamir, ed., Golda, pp. 114–117.

<sup>25</sup> Shapira, Berl, pp. 635–637.

<sup>26</sup> Secretariat of the Va’ad Hapoel, 28 April 1942, pp. 13–14.

was reached: Half a day of work, and half a day of holiday. If that was the case, demanded Golda, payment for the half day of work should go to mobilization, security and immigration.

News of the beginning of the annihilation of European Jewry started filtering in and was initially received with a great deal of skepticism. News items were treated as rumors. Editors usually added to them a caveat: “this item has to be treated with skepticism”. No one was prepared to believe that a large-scale Holocaust was indeed taking place. Even when authorized information arrived on the final solution plan of the Nazis, the Yishuv heads groped their way like blind people in the dark. Their contact with the free world was virtually blocked. At the end of 1942, a proposal was raised in the Mapai Central Committee to send an information mission to the United States, Britain and South Africa. As usual, Golda’s name was mentioned for this mission with Berl, but nothing came of it.<sup>27</sup> It was a tragic situation: As European Jewry was being systematically annihilated, Palestinian Jewry stood by helplessly. The Yishuv carried on its life attempting to entrench itself, strengthen its power and prepare for the post-war struggles. The goal was already fixed when Ben-Gurion and Weizmann, in the course of the American Zionist Conference held in New York’s Biltmore Hotel in May 1942, called for the establishment of a “Jewish Commonwealth” in Palestine as part of the free world and for granting the Jewish Agency authority over immigration.

In the fall of 1942, the tide turned. The German army was beaten at the gates of Egypt and began its withdrawal which within few months would bring it to Tunisia, pursued by the British Eighth Army. The threat of a German invasion of Palestine was over. The Germans were defeated by the Russians in Stalingrad, and even in the distant Pacific Ocean American forces were slowly pushing Japan back. When the military threat to Palestine receded, the short-lived honeymoon between the Hagannah and the Mandatory regime ended. Weapons distributed to the Hagannah were recalled and searches for arms by British police took place in various kibbutzim. The British did, however, permit the dispatch of a number of Palmach members who would be parachuted beyond enemy lines in the Balkans to establish contact with partisans and Jewish communities. Golda was involved in this effort, met with the parachutists on the eve of their departure and looked after their families. But she preferred leaving the broad strategy to Ben-Gurion while concentrating on mundane matters. Ben-Gurion spent many months in London and Washington hoping to meet President Roosevelt (which he never did). He spent much time in sterile arguments with Weizmann on future plans. Things reached such a level that Berl berated him for engaging in futile

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<sup>27</sup> Mapai Central Committee, 30 November 1942, quoted by Porat, *Leadership*, p. 79.

arguments. Many leaders wondered why he was spending so much time abroad when he was needed at home.

But Ben-Gurion envisioned the destruction of European Jewry and he realized that the Yishuv was impotent and could do little to help in the rescue of the Jews. He argued that for the time being the main effort must be devoted to strengthen the Yishuv and prepare it for the coming ordeals. While the Yishuv watched helplessly, the little it could do was to send memoranda, engage in protest demonstrations and place advertisements in the newspapers. In 1943, Golda felt that her colleagues in the Jewish Agency Executive and Mapai heads were not doing enough to pressure the allies to rescue those who were still alive. Emissaries working out of Istanbul met Hungarian Jewish leaders. Golda's name was raised as coordinating the work of the emissaries, even though this effort was limited and served mainly to obtain information on what was taking place in the Nazi inferno.

In March 1943 she and Remez raised a new idea. Highly disturbed by the passive attitude of the Yishuv, the Jewish Agency's inertia and the very limited activities by international Jewish organizations to arouse public opinion, they proposed that each adult in the Yishuv would sign a petition. Golda hoped that similar petitions would be signed by Jewish communities in the United States, Britain and South Africa. The idea was considered in the Jewish Agency Executive and the National Council. The majority saw it as waste of time. Golda was livid: "What do we want from the goyim if we do not raise the roof"?<sup>28</sup> She was able to organize a big protest demonstration for rescue in which she said the following:

Woe to us, to our nation, that we are so weak, that we are so much dependent on others. But we are lucky that we have a corner of a homeland, that we are able to extend our help as much as we can. At the time when someone made sure we do not receive the horrific news of the holocaust of our people in Europe lest we scream and demand the opening of the gates of the country. And at the time when it was evident what was done to our people—the world that is fighting Hitler stood by. Everybody is dealing with us, devising suggestions, those who claim to fix a new, just world, and have an idea for everything—they lack an idea how to save a few Jews from the Nazi inferno. They try to comfort and silence us by saying we are not the only ones.

There is no truth in the imaginary choice: concentrate on the effort to achieve victory over the enemy or to rescue Jews.

We say simply: We have no interest in such a beautiful world if there will remain no Jews to enjoy it. More so, a new world will not arise if millions of Jews will be exterminated.

What is the human-spiritual strength of those fighting Hitler and what is the authority of their struggle, if their governments cannot save Jews from extermination? We demand of

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<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 93; see discussions of the Secretariat of the Va'ad Hapoel, 29 April 1943, p. 342.

the millions of these fighters to raise their voices and demand of their governments rescue acts at once.

But the first obligation that rests upon us, the Hebrew Yishuv, the workers, the few who know, is to create a national power. We always knew: we have no right of existence and there is no future to our enterprise if its builders will not be those who come from the Diaspora. We must focus our thoughts on those whom we have not had a chance to bring here, and if there is a gnawing doubt that there is something we can still do, it is now clear: there is a possibility and this possibility is an obligation for us. A year ago, the Histadrut sent one of its members to a place where we can watch the events and the action has not ceased, it is growing. A few months ago, when the clear news arrived that we can help, the Histadrut turned to its three sectors—the farming, the cooperatives and the economic institutions—and demanded of them a great deal and received at once more than it asked for.

This sum that is available to the Histadrut created a great deal of activity, because many sectors felt they could not stand idly by at the time the Histadrut began its activity. And once again word came that there is need for more help, and now the Mobilization campaign took upon itself the rescue operation and increased the amount of the campaign. The Histadrut said that the money is not enough and we have to raise larger sums for those who are involved in rescue.

The superpowers have no ships to rescue Jews. But the workers in this country will find the means, because they place all the means in their possession to this action. Each worker will now have another reason in addition to his commitment to the Mobilization Fund, his share in the rescue. But we also have to raise a one day's salary and at once, not later than the middle of the coming week. Other sectors are also saying they will follow the Histadrut, because the sense of the terrible national catastrophe is pulsating in the entire Yishuv, and this requires providing full aid.

The purpose of this gathering is to unite with our friends who are rising in the Diaspora, who do not want to die quietly and submissively, but to die bravely to rescue Jewish honor for generations to come. We must announce that we do not accept this catastrophe and there is no other consideration save one, every Jew who can be saved, and can still be saved, the entire Yishuv is primed to do so.<sup>29</sup>

Her thoughts focused a great deal on rescuing the remnants of the Holocaust survivors, but she knew well that not much could have been done. This impotence stood out when she met with MacPherson, the Mandatory Government Chief Secretary. "I went to him", she related years later, "and said we can bring thousands of children from Hungary, and what we need is a boat. I told the Chief Secretary this. He looked at me a bit with contempt. 'Don't you know there is a war on? And we need all the ships for the war?' I said, yes, I heard there was a war but I want to ask you—if these were English children, would you find a ship? I say to his credit,

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<sup>29</sup> Speech by Golda Meir in the "Convention of the Workers of the Land of Israel for Rescue", in Tamir, ed., Golda, pp. 118–120.

he did not lie and did not reply”.<sup>30</sup> This episode only deepened her feeling that the Yishuv had to begin to plan the absorption of the few who would somehow manage to survive. The Yishuv would have to look after the human skeletons whose contribution to the war effort would be zero, and they would be a burden on the Yishuv. At the end of 1943 she voiced these ideas: “We shall not be able to deal with preparation and immigration of pioneers as in the past. Now it is a matter of bringing every Jew, not because he is a farmer but because he is a Jew in the ghetto”.<sup>31</sup>

Other matters required her attention as well. Among them the working conditions of thousands of Jewish workers in British army camps in Palestine. She negotiated with the military authorities about wages, cost of living and other work terms to enable them to keep up with the rising prices caused by various shortages. At the beginning of the war, she demanded that the Histadrut and the Jewish Agency participate in a public committee organized by the Mandatory regime to deal with the provision of basic commodities. Shortages led to black market, rising prices and inflation. The Histadrut demanded and won the right to link wages to the cost of living index. The only ones who refused this arrangement were the military authorities. They claimed that only London could order them to pay cost of living raise. In the summer of 1942, Golda engaged in a lively correspondence on this matter with them and decided to hold a one-day protest strike in military bases (May 10, 1943). The threat was enough and the Histadrut won its struggle.<sup>32</sup>

She also dealt with an edict issued by the Mandatory regime whereby workers were confined to their workplace with no right to leave it except by written permission from the employer: penalty was imprisonment. Golda informed the Mandatory Government that she was not convinced of the justice of this edict and thought it would harm the war effort. She decided that the Histadrut would not cooperate and would not be represented in any body that implemented this edict. But she did represent the Histadrut in a Mandatory commission on wages.<sup>33</sup>

The Yishuv now entered a period of unprecedented economic prosperity. Its industries worked incessantly for the war effort, with the British army of the entire Middle East as its major customer. Agricultural production intensified and its products were sold to the local market and the army. The Histadrut’s

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<sup>30</sup> Lossin, *Pillar of Fire*, p. 293.

<sup>31</sup> Yoav Galbar, “Zionist Policy and the Fate of European Jewry”, in *Zionism*, 7, (Spring 1983), Tel Aviv, p. 146.

<sup>32</sup> Secretariat of the Va’ad Hapoel, 7 May 1943.

<sup>33</sup> Giora Rozen, “The Trade Union of the Histadrut during World War II”, MA thesis, 1974, in the Archive of the Institute for the Study of the Workers Movement.

industrial enterprises began to show profits and a number of kibbutzim and moshavim began to breathe easier for the first time since their establishment. Unemployment lessened, partly because almost 27,500 men and women volunteered for military duty in the British army. Thousands of others were mobilized in the Hagannah. In fact there was labor shortage. Perhaps because of this prosperity, less attention was paid to the Holocaust of European Jewry. Cultural life in the Yishuv flourished. Theaters, cinemas and concert halls were packed. Many books were written and published. The Hebrew University, the Haifa Technion and the Weizmann Institute of Science continued to function. The Allies demanded more products, bases, camps, air fields, warehouses and maintenance bases for the war effort. They turned almost instinctively to the Yishuv, mainly because there was no one else in the Middle East who was reliable and could deliver high quality work. The Yishuv responded avidly. They wanted to be identified with the war effort which affected them more than others in this region. In this way the industries would become stronger. They would also meet Jews in neighboring countries and encourage immigration from Syria, Iraq and Lebanon, some of it on foot. Another opportunity presented itself—acquisition by various means, legal and mostly illegal, of weapons from British army stores for the Hagannah. The Solel Boneh Company was in full swing in Palestine, Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, and even reached Iraq and Iran. Morris Meyerson, who was employed by Solel Boneh, was sent to Iran in 1943 because he could speak English. Most of its workers were Hagannah members who never balked at an opportunity to obtain weapons.

By mid 1943, on the eve of the Allied invasion of Italy, relations between the Yishuv and the Mandatory Government worsened. The White Paper policy was scrupulously implemented and the cooperation with the Hagannah ended. There were casualties in the course of searches for weapons hidden in kibbutzim. In kibbutz Ramat Hakovesh, a young Jew was killed when he protested the search. This was the background for the trial of two Hagannah members, Aryeh Syrkin and Avraham Reichlin, who were charged with smuggling weapons out of British military camps.<sup>34</sup>

The British sought to prove in this trial that Jews were stealing and smuggling weapons to their bases and aware harming the war effort. They wanted to denounce the Jewish Agency, the Histadrut and mainly the Hagannah, all accused of being a cancer in the body of the war effort. The Hagannah decided to react and to reveal for the first time the dimension of the Hagannah-British army cooperation in the early years of the war. Golda was called as a Hagannah

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<sup>34</sup> History of the Hagannah, Vol. II, part 1, Tel Aviv, 1946, p. 179.

witness and reminded the military tribunal in Jerusalem that the Jewish Agency, the National Council and the Histadrut acted in accordance with the British authority's request to mobilize young Jews for the British army. She revealed the existence of the Palmach and the nature of its role at the time when Rommel's armies had stood at the gates of Egypt a year earlier. She mentioned the existence of the Hagannah and stressed that Jews must be able to defend themselves. The following exchange will show why she became the darling of the Yishuv the next day:

Major Baxter: You are a nice, peaceful, law-abiding lady, are you not?

Golda: I think I am.

Q: And you have always been so?

A: I have never been accused of anything.

Q: Well, listen to this from a speech of yours on May 2, 1940: 'For twenty years we were led to trust the British Government but we have been betrayed. The Ben Shemen case is an example of this. We have never taught our youth the use of firearms for offense but for defensive purposes only. And if they are criminals, then all Jews in Palestine are criminals'. What about that?

A: If it is a question of defense, then I, like every Jew in Palestine, am for defense.

Q: Were you yourself trained in the use of arms?

A: I don't know whether I am required to answer that question. In any case, I have never used firearms.

Q: Have you trained the Jewish youth in the use of firearms?

A: Jewish youth will defend Jewish life and property in the event of riots and the necessity to defend life and property. I, as well as other Jews, would defend myself.

Tribunal President: Please reply only to the questions.

Q: Do you have an intelligence service in the Histadrut?

A: No.

Q: What?

A: You heard me, no.

Q: Have you heard of the Hagannah?

A: Yes.

Q: Do they have arms?

A: I don't know, but I suppose so.

Q: Have you heard of the Palmach?



A: Yes.

Q: What is it?

A: I first heard of the Palmach as groups of young people, organized with the knowledge of the authorities, who were specially trained at the time when the German army was drawing near to Palestine. Its function was to help the British army in any way necessary should the enemy invade the country.

Q: And are these groups still in existence?

A: I don't know.

Q: Is this a legal organization?

A: All I know is that these groups were organized to help the British army and with the knowledge of the authorities.

Q: Can members of the Histadrut be members of the Hagannah or Palmach?

A: Yes, it may be that there are members of the Histadrut who are also members of the Hagannah and the Palmach. They are prepared to defend themselves when attacked. We have had very bad experiences in this country. When I say we are ready to defend, I want to make myself crystal clear. This defense is not theoretical. We still remember the riots of 1921, 1922, and 1929 and the four years of disturbances from 1936 to 1939. Everybody in Palestine knows, as do the authorities, that not only would there have been nothing left, but Jewish honor would have been blemished had there not been people ready for defense, and if brave Jewish youths had not defended the Jewish settlements...

Q: What about this business of stealing 300 rifles and ammunition from the army?

A: We are interested in this war and in the victory of the British forces, and stealing from the army is a crime in our eyes.

Q: But these arms might be useful for the Hagannah?

A: There is not a Jew who is not interested in this war and in the victory of the British forces.

Re-examined by defense counsel Dr. Joseph, Golda said that even senior British army officers had taken part in the Jewish Agency recruiting campaign and that some of them had come to the Histadrut to ask for its advice an help in recruiting Jews to the British army.

Q: Did the Hagannah also have arms before the outbreak of war?

A: I do not know, but I suppose so. There were riots before the war.

Tribunal President: I ask you to limit yourself only to what concerns this case and not go backwards, or otherwise we'll soon be back two thousand years ago...

A: If the Jewish question had been solved two thousand years ago...

President: Keep quiet.

A: I object to being addressed in that manner.

President: You should know how to conduct yourself in court.

A: I beg your pardon if I interrupted you, but you should not address me in that manner.<sup>35</sup>

This was Golda at her best, but her testimony did not prevent Syrkin from being sentenced to seven years in jail and Reichlin to ten years. But the British failed in their efforts to use this trial as a political demonstration.

Hardly had she recovered from this ordeal, when she found herself embroiled in a totally different storm. After years of bitter conflicts with Chaim Weizmann, on November 14, 1943, Ben-Gurion submitted his resignation as Chairman of the Jewish Agency Executive. Few understood the background for this move and even fewer had the time or patience to delve into the details. What became apparent was that in the midst of war, with the Warsaw Ghetto in ruins, European Jewry being exterminated, Ben-Gurion was back to his petty tricks. In a Mapai leadership meeting, Golda lashed out at Ben-Gurion: “I would like to ask Ben-Gurion a simple question. Ben-Gurion who taught us a great deal about what comradeship is, what is the power of comradeship when all these demands, all the great plans and the good will have no value”? She was furious that Ben-Gurion imposed decisions on his colleagues without prior consultations and without allowing them to remonstrate with him and try to thwart his impulsive decisions. She failed to understand how he was able to hurt the unity of the Zionist Movement and the Yishuv in this time of dire emergency. She, who adhered to politics of consensus, could not understand that Ben-Gurion rejected his colleagues’ appeal and insisted on resigning.<sup>36</sup> Soon he relented and took it back. But the entire affair left a bitter residue among his colleagues because they now lived under the constant threat of a resignation by Ben-Gurion and could never predict his moods. Yet they also realized they had no other leader of his stature and strength. They never knew at any given time what mood possessed Ben-Gurion, what he would do next, how he would react and what factors would determine his decisions. Golda would learn this and many other lessons over the years until Ben-Gurion’s final retirement from politics in 1970, exhausted by struggles, alone, bitter and obsessed. He accused Golda and others of abandonment.

By 1944, it was evident that the war was entering its decisive final stages. The Allies were deep in consultations on the nature of the post-war arrangements, as were the Yishuv heads. Ben-Gurion invested much time and effort in planning the Yishuv’s organization in order to face the new challenges once the war would be over. The Zionist Movement decided that they were going to present precise

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<sup>35</sup> For the testimony of Golda Meir see Tamir, ed., *Golda*, pp. 120–124.

<sup>36</sup> Yosef Gorny, *Partnership and Conflict—Chaim Weizmann and the Jewish Labor Movement in Eretz Israel*, Tel Aviv, 1976, pp. 154–155; Golda’s speech in full pp. 227–231.

demands to the Allies in general and the British Government in particular. After what had befallen the Jewish People, there was no going back to the White Paper policy, to closed gates in Palestine and the continuation of banning land sale to Jews in most of the country, just at the time when there was need to prepare to absorb the Holocaust survivors. An opportunity for the Histadrut and the Yishuv to present their case occurred when the British Trade Union Congress, headed by Ernest Bevin and Herbert Morrison, invited the Histadrut in February 1944 to send a delegation to an international conference of trade unions. On February 23, 1944, there was a discussion on the makeup of the delegation and what points they would present. Ben-Gurion explained the demands of the Jewish People and stated that they would focus on the Biltmore Plan. Golda's words are important to illustrate her thinking on the Holocaust and what would be, much later, her policies as foreign minister and prime minister of Israel:

We have come to realize that there is no friend in the world who will look after our needs without us...I think there is no other way to attain that which unites us all, mass-immigration and large-scale Jewish settlement. Those things without such authority will not be given to us by this or that Mandate. What happened in the world in recent years did not increase in me the belief that some international agency, some sort of a League of Nations that will arise tomorrow, will protect us and help us more than the forces in whose hands the matter of rescuing Jews lay and who did not do so. Those very forces that tomorrow will be the decisive ones in the new world and in the new League of Nations. Why am I expected to believe that those who did not rescue millions of Jews from death will enter into a quarrel with the Arabs tomorrow because of us? Perhaps there will be need to quarrel. What happened in those years did not intensify in me the trust in an international mandate.<sup>37</sup>

The conference never took place and the delegation stayed home. The Mapai leaders then focused their attention on the internal crisis that eventually split the party. During the war, there were many signs of unrest in various sections of the party, between those who demanded a far greater activist policy against the British and the Arabs, and the majority who wanted to continue the policy of self-restraint. The minority also claimed that when it came to social and economic policies, the Mapai leadership was too much absorbed in national issues relating to the establishment of the future Jewish State and ignored issues closer to the worker. They argued that there was very close cooperation between employers and the Histadrut and especially with the Tel Aviv Workers Council. They accused Mapai's leadership in the Histadrut of preferring to preserve their own interests rather than help the workers attain a higher standard of living and enjoy the benefits of the economic prosperity that the country experienced during the war.

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<sup>37</sup> Secretariat of the Va'ad Hapoel, 23 February 1944, pp. 151–152.

Among the minority leaders were Yitzhak Tabenkin, Yisrael Galili and even the future Palmach commander Yigal Allon. They became known as faction B.

Among their targets were Golda Meir and Levi Eshkol, both of whom headed the Tel Aviv Workers Council. In 1943, Golda's responsibilities as Head of the Histadrut's Political Department included looking after the Tel Aviv Workers Council. She, at Ben-Gurion's request, brought about the appointment of Levi Eshkol, a rising young Mapai leader, as Secretary of the Council. This Council looked after the interests of some 40,000 Histadrut members, two thirds of whom voted for Mapai. Golda and Eshkol worked closely together in this body until 1945.

The split in Mapai occurred in the summer of 1944 but did not endanger the standing of Mapai in the Yishuv or the Histadrut. On August 6, 1944, elections were held among Histadrut members for the forthcoming Histadrut Convention. Mapai won 53.6 % of the votes. Faction B received 18 % while the left-wing parties such as Hashomer Ha'tsair won 20.7 %. Mapai survived, but its total hegemony among the workers was somewhat dented. The party was dealt another terrible blow when Berl Katznelson, the light and spiritual guide of the party, died suddenly in August 1944. Two days before he died he told Golda: "They are distancing the youth away from me".<sup>38</sup> The entire Yishuv mourned. From now until the early 1960's, the dominant leader would be Ben-Gurion. He would put the stamp of his personality and ideology on the future of the Yishuv and the State.

Mapai also preserved its power in the National Institutions. On August 1, 1944, elections were held for the Elected Assembly, the Parliament of the Yishuv. Mapai won 37 % of the votes. Golda was elected to the Assembly and on September 12 was elected member of the National Council Executive. This body was headed by Golda's mentor David Remez.<sup>39</sup> He yielded his position as Secretary General of the Histadrut to Yossef Sprinzak. Eshkol and Golda remained the dominant powers in the Tel Aviv Workers Council. This arrangement was not always harmonious. According to the testimony of Aharon Becker, future Secretary General of the Histadrut, "one evening Eshkol came to my kitchen and poured out his heart. Golda was meddling in everything. It's impossible to determine who is responsible for what".<sup>40</sup> But another testimony rejects this. The Histadrut leader Yitzhak Eilam wrote: "Eshkol was tasked to be the Secretary of the Tel Aviv Workers Council. He conditioned his agreement on having someone else to help him since he was not sure he could do the job properly. Golda rose, and as was her wont, volunteered to serve as his assistant...this situation lasted for six months

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<sup>38</sup> Shapira, Berl, pp. 705–706.

<sup>39</sup> Erez, Remez, p. 414.

<sup>40</sup> Aharon Becker, *With the Times and our Generation*, Tel Aviv, 1982, pp. 776–777. See also Arnon Lammfomm, *Levi Eshkol, Political Biography 1944–1969*, Jerusalem, 2015.

until Ben-Gurion preferred that she concentrate on political work and demanded that she be released from the Tel Aviv Workers Council”.<sup>41</sup> Eshkol’s biographer also ascribes to Golda a central role in the council and claims that she was the one who, with Ben-Gurion’s approval, brought Eshkol to the job as Secretary of the very important and influential Tel Aviv Workers Council. Whatever the case, she did not deem this part of her life as central or meaningful, and it is not even mentioned in her memoirs.

The war ended in May 1945. Only then did the Yishuv and the Jewish People begun to fathom the dimension and meaning of the Holocaust. The leaders were beset by guilty feelings. Had they done everything they could to prevent the extermination of a third of the Jewish People? The only one among them who could be proud of a concrete achievement was Moshe Sharett. He had won the British Government’s approval to establish the Jewish Fighting Brigade at the end of 1944. This brigade consisted of three battalions of Palestinian Jews commanded by Jewish and British officers. They managed to participate in the fighting on the Italian front in the closing months of the war and to establish contact with the survivors. In the War of Independence, the soldiers and officers who had served in the brigade would play central roles in the future IDF, alongside men from the Palmach and Hagannah who had remained in Palestine at the orders of the Jewish Agency.

The war inured the Yishuv leadership. Its standing rose in the country and abroad. But now the leaders acquired a new syndrome—the Holocaust Syndrome. They were all determined that this would never happen again. If another Holocaust was to happen, the Jewish People would disappear from the face of the earth. From now on, the efforts were concentrated towards the achievement of two goals: first, was to bring as many survivors as possible to the shores of Palestine. The second was to create a political infrastructure for the future Jewish State. Few ever dreamed that the second goal would be attained in less than three years of vicious struggle against the British. In achieving both, Golda now played a central role. There were no longer any doubts over her central and dominant position in the Histadrut, Mapai and the Yishuv. She reached the top ranks with some help from her mentors, but mostly due to much patience, hard work, long hours, involvement in many jobs and willingness to shoulder responsibilities. She had also demonstrated that she was made of the stuff of leaders.

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<sup>41</sup> Eilam, *Close to Golda*, pp. 28–29.

## 7 Towards Independence (1945–1948)

The Yishuv did not participate in the celebrations that erupted among the Allied nations when Germany finally surrendered on May 8, 1945. There were few families of European origin who did not lose parents, sisters, brothers and even children in the Holocaust. It was clear to the Yishuv's leadership that the national struggle was entering its final and most critical phase. It would initially be against the British Mandatory regime and later, perhaps, against the local Arabs and the neighboring countries. The immediate task was to prepare the Yishuv, mainly its military power, and that required a larger population. The British realized even before the war that the only way to throttle the Zionist enterprise in Palestine would be to cut off immigration and ban settlement activities through the prevention of sale of land to Jews. This was the gist of the May 1939 White Paper whose regulations remained in force even after the war ended. Now the Zionists felt that the world owed the Holocaust survivors a homeland of their own. The Yishuv, which contributed some 27,500 men and women for service in the British army, now demanded an adequate reward. Henceforth the struggle focused on efforts to have the 1939 White Paper rescinded. Many hopes were pinned on the British Labor Party, which supported Zionism and in its 1944 platform even mentioned the possibility of transferring some Palestinian Arabs to neighboring countries if and when a Jewish state would arise.

No wonder there was genuine satisfaction in the Yishuv when the British Labor Party won the national elections on July 26, 1945, and a new cabinet was formed, headed by Clement Attlee. The veteran trade union leader Ernest Bevin was appointed foreign secretary. Within a few weeks the hopes were rudely shattered when the new Labor government issued a statement on Palestine on November 11, 1945. The White Paper would remain in force, but Britain now called for the creation of a joint Anglo-American Committee of Inquiry that would proceed to Europe for talks with Jewish Displaced Persons (meaning Holocaust survivors) who found themselves still in European refugee camps, some even in former Nazi concentration camps such as Dachau. The Committee would later visit Palestine to experience the situation firsthand and make policy recommendations to the British and American governments. The United States became deeply involved in the fate of European Jewry when President Harry S. Truman asked Prime Minister Clement Attlee in October 1945, to admit immediately 100,000 Holocaust survivors to Palestine. Britain rejected the plea citing the need to retain Arab goodwill in the face of the emerging Cold War and the strategic importance for the West of the Arab oil fields, the Suez Canal and naval and air bases.

The policy statement stunned the Yishuv. When its leaders recovered from the shock, they decided on two policy options. The first was to intensify the

immigration effort, named *Aliyah B* (or illegal immigration), to increase the number of Jews in the country in order to broaden the military and economic infrastructure of the Yishuv which would perhaps at some point in the future create a Jewish majority in Palestine. The second avenue was to launch an armed struggle, in fact to engage in anti-British terrorist acts. This would be done by the three underground organizations operating together for the first time. In September 1945, Ben-Gurion had already approved the creation of the “Resistance Movement”, consisting of the Hagannah, Irgun and Lechi, called derisively by the British the Stern Gang so named after their slain leader Yair Stern who was killed by the British police in 1942. The fighters would undertake military operations against the British army, police and civil administration. The movement would be led by a unified command that would obtain authorization for its acts from the Jewish Agency. At this stage, the aim was not to drive the British out of the country, but to create a situation that would persuade the British Government to reverse its policy and return to the policy of establishing a national Jewish homeland in Palestine under British patronage. Some Yishuv leaders were terrified that if the British decided to unilaterally abandon the mandate, they could abandon 600,000 Jews to the mercy of the Arabs who would attempt to throw them into the sea. Therefore, if the British eventually left, the Jewish leadership hoped it would be done gradually, giving them time to prepare the Yishuv’s military force. In July 1945, Ben-Gurion summoned a number of wealthy American Jews to a meeting in New York and demanded they help the Hagannah to acquire air planes, tanks, heavy artillery and warships. They thought he had gone mad. They did agree to help procure machines for the production of light arms and ammunition. These machines arrived in Palestine in late 1945, disguised as agricultural equipment, and helped lay the foundations for an arms industry. Some of them were still in use in the 1990’s.

While the Yishuv leadership was prepared to consider the possibility of a Jewish state in a smaller part of Palestine in informal talks, outwardly they demanded the implementation of the Balfour Declaration, which meant that the Jewish state would consist of the entire country. By now they realized the need to garner international, mainly American support for the struggle against the British. A third avenue pursued was the continuation and expansion of Jewish settlement of the land. Between 1945 and 1948, some 50 new settlements were established—35 *kibbutzim* and 15 *moshavim*, so that when the time came, those parts of the country settled by Jews would be included in the territory of the Jewish state. These courses of action required maximum restraint, vision, faith and ability to persuade the Yishuv, mainly the youth thirsting for direct action, of the justice of the combined struggle. The younger generation was prepared to declare war on the British Empire. This was one of the reasons the Irgun and the Stern Group were able to recruit a growing number of young men and women.

They fervently advocated an immediate armed struggle, but they were not responsible to the Yishuv's elected leaders and could call for radical measures.

Golda Meyerson was among the Yishuv's leaders who together with Eliezer Kaplan, Dov Yossef, Yitzhak Ben-Zvi, Israel Rokach (Tel Aviv's mayor), and Rabbi Maimon (leader of the Mizrachi Religious Party and Ada's brother), were invited to Government House in Jerusalem to hear the Chief Secretary read to them the statement made by the British Government in Parliament. At the conclusion of the meeting they went back to the Jewish Agency building and issued a statement rejecting the new British policy. A day later, on November 14, she addressed the Secretariat of the Executive Council of the Histadrut and said:

The document handed to us by a Socialist minister in England is one that the Zionist movement, whose path was never easy, had never received. For the first time there is an attempt to eradicate the continuation of Zionism and the connection of the Jewish People to the Land of Israel. Generally, the British spoke only of the Jews who remained in Europe. The Balfour Declaration was not mentioned. No previous commitments (were cited)....

Jewish life is a very expensive commodity in our time. But Jewish life under slavery is not worth it, not only because any human being wants to be free, but because we have learned that Jewish life under slavery is no life, eventually it ends in extermination in the Diaspora and in Israel. We know that two unequal forces are facing each other. But we know that during the war Britain, standing alone, chose war and not slavery, and then too the forces were not equal. We have no navy, army and airforce, the secret of the Atomic bomb is unknown to us. We only have Jewish victims and hungry and dying Jews in the camps. But we have millions of Jews who remained alive and they will not accept this. Above all, we have a 600,000 strong Yishuv in this country with all its weaknesses, but with its might. We shall not purchase Jewish life here by abandoning Jewish life in the Diaspora by acquiescing with this terrible document. And there shall not be quiet.<sup>1</sup>

In this meeting, Golda was elected to the "Situation Committee" of the Executive Council created to deal with the new emergency. She proposed cancelling the identity cards issued by the Mandatory government to residents of the country to help illegal immigrants who arrived or were on their way to the beaches to blend into the population. She also suggested violating the nightly curfew imposed often by the British, if need be. Two days later, the Secretariat of the Executive Committee once again heard her credo. Speaking in elliptical and indirect terms, she stated:

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<sup>1</sup> Secretariat of the Va'ad Hapoel, 14 November 1945, pp. 45–48; for this period in the life of Golda Meir see Ilana Koffman, "Political Activities on Behalf of the National Institutions", in Avizohar, ed., Golda, pp. 189–249; see also Yehoshua Freundlich and Nana Sagi, eds., Political Documents of the Jewish Agency, Vols. I and II, 1945–1947, Jerusalem, 1996–1998; see also David Ben-Gurion, *Towards the End of the Mandate—Memoirs from the Legacy*, Tel Aviv, 1993.



We shall have to embark on a new way, because we have no other and no exit...our plight derives from the fact that we have no power—the question is whether after such a document we should appear declaring our weakness to the rest of the world, to show ourselves weaker than we are, or should we appear with all our strength, that little strength that we possess. I do not see much of a choice, and I have come to this conclusion because I see no other alternative. I say, however, common sense, prudence and common destiny, and not rushing towards anything that could make some noise, some shooting and some fight...

I think that in the struggle of the Jewish people for its existence all avenues are permitted. There is no immoral way, and I do not know any thing more moral than the goal that the few survivors will remain alive. If I opposed the Irgun and Stern...it was because I saw their way causing destruction and havoc to Zionism, and in order to prevent this destruction, I was prepared to fight them to the end...

I therefore say: with reason, with logic, with prudence, weighing everything a hundred times prior to doing it. But we have no alternative, we must pursue this road...I am not sure it will succeed.

Finally, one sentence regarding the other groups: if there shall be some coordination between us and them—I shall accept it for one reason—so as not to allow them to do things that we fear will harm us.

As long as they exist, I do not want to them to act freely on their own. If someone will prove to me that we have the strength to curb them later on, let them do only what we consider necessary—I shall agree to cooperate with them, so that once we embark on this dangerous road, at least we shall know that there will be no forces in some corner that will come to undermine us.

She concluded by saying that she supported Aliyah B, “but that alone—no”.<sup>2</sup> The anti-British actions during the year the “Resistance Movement” existed were approved by a secret committee called Committee X. It included Yisrael Galili and Moshe Sneh who represented the Hagannah. Occasionally they were joined by Shaul Avigur and Golda Meyerson. Menachem Begin and Chaim Landau represented the Irgun, and Nathan Yellin-Mor and Israel Eldad the Lechi.<sup>3</sup> This was the first time Golda participated in decisions that could cost lives. Most of the operations were aimed at British army and police installations and included police stations, radar stations helping to spot illegal immigrant ships, vehicles and railway lines, bridges and army bases. Special care was taken to prevent the loss of British lives so as not to give the British an excuse to carry out massive retaliatory acts against the Yishuv, confiscate weapons, arrest leaders and hurt the preparations for a future war against the Arabs. Another aim was to create a

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Elchanan Oren, *Settlement in the Years of Struggle*, Jerusalem 1978, p. 148; Menachem Begin, *The Revolt*, Tel Aviv, 1950, p. 965.

friendly and supportive public opinion in Britain and the United States. An effort was launched to instill in Diaspora Jews the feeling that the Yishuv was fighting for them as well and in this way help raise funds and bring American Jews to pressure their government to in turn pressure the British to change their policy.

At this stage the Mandatory Government decided to warn the Jewish leadership not to embark on violence. On November 23, 1945, the new High Commissioner, General Sir Alan Cunningham, invited the Yishuv's leaders to get to know them. Golda went with Ben-Gurion, Kaplan, Yoseph, Rokach and Maimon. The High Commissioner explicitly demanded there be no violence. Ben-Gurion demanded that Britain rescind the White Paper. The meeting was not cordial. Meanwhile, the Anglo-American Committee of Inquiry heard testimonies in Washington and later in London, and in early 1946 in Displaced Persons camps in Germany. The message of the survivors was simple—they wanted to go to Palestine as they saw no future in Europe. The truth was that many of them would gladly have gone to America, had the gates of that country been open. But they were still closed to Jewish survivors, although they were open to emigrants from the Baltic States, Romania, the Ukraine and Hungary, and some of the emigrants were, alas, Nazi war criminals and collaborators.

Organized American Jewry continued to press Truman on the matter of the 100,000 survivors. But they were stonewalled by State Department officials, mainly those of the Near East Section, who insisted on prior coordination with Britain before any move would be made in Palestine. This was done to minimize American involvement in the Middle East. Many were influenced by the oil lobby, others by commercial, church and even academic groups with special interests in the region that dictated rapprochement with the Arabs. The armed forces and even the Office of Strategic Services (later the CIA) also favored a pro-Arab policy for strategic reasons in view of the heating Cold War. The Zionist diplomatic effort was led by the Political Department of the Jewish Agency in Jerusalem and also included its representatives in London, New York, Washington and Paris. The policy was determined by a small group of leaders that included Ben-Gurion, Sharett, Kaplan (Jewish Agency Executive), Remez (National Council) and Golda representing the Histadrut also in her capacity as a senior Mapai leader. In this group Ben-Gurion and Golda supported an activist policy, while Sharett, Kaplan and Remez called for greater caution and moderation. From London, the aging and sick leader Chaim Weizmann asked for maximal caution, fearing that Jewish violence would bring about the collapse of the entire edifice that had been built in Palestine for decades and that his own personal work would be eradicated. The man who cemented the close ties between the Zionist movement and the British leaders since World War I was now too old and ill to confront the new British Government led by ministers who came from the trade unions and the

labor movement with whom Weizmann had no common language. Weizmann could only voice the hope that moderation and understanding would restore the ties between Britain and the Yishuv. Ben-Gurion and Golda were made of different stuff that enabled them to confront Bevin and his colleagues.

Shortly before the arrival of the Anglo-American Committee, Golda was involved in an unpleasant incident with the Chief Secretary John Shaw. The Histadrut discovered that German prisoners of war were going to be used to construct military bases in Palestine and complained to Shaw. He confessed that this was indeed the case but that the Germans would not work north of Gaza, besides, he added, there was shortage of labor. Perhaps, Golda suggested icily, he could turn to the Histadrut to locate workers. His answer was that Jewish workers are unreliable and that “things they build tend to blow up.” Her cynical reply was: “Nazis are more reliable.”<sup>4</sup> The project was abandoned when the British realized there was a limit to provocation. Golda’s faith in the wisdom of the Mandatory regime was now completely eroded. How could they ignore the Yishuv’s sensitivities?

At the end of February 1946, the Elected Assembly met in Jerusalem to discuss whether the Yishuv’s representatives should appear before the Anglo-American Committee. The Jewish Agency Executive had already decided to appear but sought broader support. Golda spoke in favor of appearing, saying there was no need to quarrel with the United States that unlike Britain had no colonial past.<sup>5</sup> On February 27 the Jewish Agency Executive decided that the Jewish witnesses to present the political aspects would be Weizmann, Ben-Gurion and Sharett, the economic experts would be Kaplan, Horowitz and Schmorak, and Golda would testify on behalf of the Histadrut.<sup>6</sup>

The Committee settled in the “King David” hotel and heard testimonies across the street in the YMCA building. In her testimony Golda decided not to limit herself solely to Histadrut matters, but spoke of the urgent need to find a solution to the Palestine problem. Her appearance on March 25 evoked much interest. The next day the “Palestine Post” wrote: “With her direct approach to the essence of the Jewish problem, her assumption that it was understandable and human, and in her clear unequivocal replies, Mrs. Golda Meyerson, the only woman to testify before the Inquiry Committee...dispelled the uncomfortable court-room atmosphere, the irritation and boredom that had laterly prevailed.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Secretariat of the Va’ad Hapoel, 18 February 1946, p. 117.

<sup>5</sup> Yossef Heller, “The Anglo-American Commission of Inquiry”, in *Shalem*, 3, 1981, pp. 213–294; see also protocols of the discussion in the Fourth Elected Assembly, Fourth Session, 11–12 February 1946 in the Central Zionist Archives file J1/7223.

<sup>6</sup> Heller, “Anglo-American Commission”, p. 253.

<sup>7</sup> *Palestine Post*, 26 March 1946.

Reading from a prepared text, Golda explained the background of the Histadrut's founders against the backdrop of “persecution, slaughter, insecurity and helplessness”. She quoted Bialik's poem “On the Slaughter”:

I grieve for you, my children, my heart is sad for you,  
 Your dead are vainly dead and neither I nor you  
 Know why you died or wherefore, nor for whom,  
 Even as your life—so senseless was your doom.

Explaining the aims of Zionism and the Histadrut, she stated that her generation was the one that decided to put an end to meaningless Jewish lives or deaths. She thought that the Committee members understood the elementary foundation of Zionism—rejection of the old Jewish way of life. “The pioneers came to Palestine because they believed the only solution for the senselessness of Jewish life and Jewish death lay in the creation of an independent Jewish life in the Jewish homeland. The pioneers also came to create a new society built on the bases of equality, justice and cooperation”... She spoke at length about the futile efforts of the Histadrut to attain a working relationship with the Palestinian Arabs. She then declared that she was “authorized on behalf of close to 160,000 members of our federation, the Histadrut, to state here in the clearest terms that there is nothing that Jewish labor is not prepared to do in this country in order to receive large masses of Jewish immigration, with no limitations and no conditions whatsoever...This, indeed, was the goal for which we came here, otherwise there is no sense to our life here.” The next point impressed her interlocutors the most, because as usual, she succeeded in presenting the issue in clear and simple terms. Speaking with no prepared text, she said:

I don't know, gentlemen, whether you, who have the good fortune to belong to the two greatest democratic nations, the British and the American, can, with the best will and intentions, realize what it means to be a member of the people whose very right to exist is constantly being questioned: our right to be Jews such as we are, no better, but no worse than others in this world, with our own language, our culture and the right of self-determination and with a readiness to dwell in friendship and cooperation with those near us and those far away...We want only that which is given naturally to all peoples of the world, to be masters of our own fate—only of our fate, not of the destiny of others...to live as of right and not on sufferance...

The questions that followed her presentation dealt with Arab-Jewish labor relations, the role of the Histadrut in the economic development of the country, social security, wages and working conditions and more. At the conclusion, the American Chairman Justice Hutcheson of Texas said: “I have no further

questions, but out of curiosity to your fluent English, I shall ask—where did you learn English? I come from Milwaukee, Wisconsin,” answered Golda.<sup>8</sup> Hutcheson obviously had not done his homework. Golda rose and was followed in the witness chair by Ahmad Shuqairi, representing the Arab Higher Committee. Eighteen years later he would be the first chairman of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO).

During the Committee’s stay, Golda established close ties to three members: Bartley Crum, a San Francisco lawyer, James McDonald (whom she met in Evian in 1938) and Richard Crossman, a Labor Member of the House of Commons, who to Bevin’s great dismay became an ardent Zionist. But these three were unable to prevent the majority from in effect not deciding on the future of the country, leaving the British administration responsible for the running of Palestine for the time being and looking towards a bi-national state. They did recommend the admission of 100,000 survivors within three years. The ball was back in the hands of the British, who did not regard the Zionist Movement as a national liberation movement fighting an oppressive colonial regime, the way they viewed the struggle in India and later in Africa. If the British ever thought in terms of a national liberation struggle, they tended to ascribe it to the Arabs. The Zionist leadership was very careful not to use such terms as an “anti-imperialist struggle” (used by the Irgun and the Stern group). The Zionist leaders still clung to the hope that an understanding could be reached with the British that would postpone the inevitable struggle against the Palestinian Arabs and the neighbouring countries, until the Yishuv had become stronger.<sup>9</sup>

The British interpreted the Committee’s recommendations as green light to undertake military measures against the Yishuv, mainly against the Hagannah, which they rightly saw as a highly disciplined, well-organized militia, armed with light weapons. The British estimated their number at some 100,000 men and women, twice its actual strength. Before dealing with the Hagannah, they tightened the naval blockade on the country’s coast to prevent illegal immigrant boats from approaching. British agents swarmed in Italian and French ports to prevent their sailing. On April 1, 1946, an Italian ship called “Fede” was about to sail from the Italian port of La Spezia with 1,014 illegal immigrants on board. The Italian authorities caved in to British demands and delayed the ship’s sailing. A week later the immigrants declared a hunger strike. Mapai’s Secretariat met and decided by a majority of 7 to 5 to join the hunger strike. Two days later the National

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<sup>8</sup> Azriel Karlebach, ed. *The Anglo-American Commission of Inquiry on Palestine*, Tel Aviv, 1946, pp. 473–485.

<sup>9</sup> See Richard Crossman, *Palestine Mission*, London, 1946, and Bartley Crum, *Behind the Silken Curtain*, New York, 1947.

Council Executive also decided to join the strike. It started on April 13 when ten Yishuv leaders, headed by Golda and Remez, sat on the steps of the National Institutions building in Jerusalem and refused to eat. The international echoes were enough to break the British stance, and they let the immigrants sail on two ships, the “Fede”, which was renamed “Dov Hoz”, and the former “Fenice”, now renamed “Eliyahu Golomb”, after the two Hagannah leaders who died prematurely.<sup>10</sup>

The hunger strike taught the Yishuv’s leadership a number of lessons. Pressure yields results, especially if accompanied by the creation of sympathetic public opinion abroad. They also realized that the British miscalculated in assessing international, mainly American, public opinion and the Yishuv’s adamant and determined position when it came to immigration. The British Government did not yet attach much weight to a growing number of voices in England that called for reconsideration of British policy in Palestine. Golda now became a highly sought-after spokesperson among the growing foreign press corps in Jerusalem. Her impressive appearance before the Anglo-American Committee and her role in the hunger strike made her a central political figure. Her English, her availability, and her ability to make headlines—all this made her a first-class propaganda asset.

Before the British Government decided how to react to the Committee’s recommendation to admit 100,000 refugees, they announced that they would allow this only if the Hagannah disarmed. The Yishuv could never agree to this idea. No one wanted to abandon the Yishuv to the mercy of the British and the Arabs. Thirty years of British rule had taught the Jews an invaluable lesson—it must rely only on itself when it came to its defense. It was then that the British decided to break the Yishuv’s military backbone, arrest and, if necessary, deport its heads. It came after a series of highly impressive and effective operations undertaken mainly by the Hagannah, culminating on June 19 with the “night of the bridges”, in the course of which most of the bridges connecting Palestine with the neighbouring countries were blown up. The British came to the conclusion that the Yishuv was now led by a group of radicals and they would have to seek more “moderate” leaders who would agree to stop the armed resistance. Golda and other leaders began to hear reports from Jewish policemen serving in the Mandatory police that the British were planning an operation, code-named “Agatha”, calling for massive arrests of the heads of the Yishuv and the Hagannah, and extensive search for weapons. The blow fell on Saturday, June 29. In the early hours of the morning, most of the Jewish Agency Executive members were arrested and imprisoned in

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<sup>10</sup> History of the Hagannah, Vol. III, part 2, Tel Aviv 1976, pp. 1123–1130.

the Latroun internment camp. Among them were Moshe Sharett, Dov Yossef, David Remez, Rabbi Fishman, Yitzhak Greunbaum, David Hacohen and others. Ben-Gurion was in Paris at the time, and the commander of the Hagannah, Moshe Sneh, succeeded in making his way to Haifa from where he sailed to France on July 22, 1946.

Golda was not arrested, probably intentionally. That morning she heard steps near her home in Tel Aviv, but no one came to detain her. Among those who phoned to find out if she was at home was Paula Ben-Gurion. Golda assumed that Paula wanted to determine Golda's importance to the British. Perhaps the British feared that by arresting a woman they would create adverse public opinion. Maybe they thought of her as a "moderate". If they did, they were very much mistaken. Another view ascribes her staying out of prison to the High Commissioner himself. Sir Alan Cunningham had a number of conversations with her and was quite impressed, enough to save her the pleasure of sitting in a detention camp.

"Operation Agatha" catapulted Golda to a top leadership position. Ben-Gurion was in France, Weizmann was recovering from an eye operation at his home in Rehovoth and Sharett was detained in Latroun. Sharett hoped that Kaplan would take over and asked that no immediate decision be made about his replacement. He knew that Golda followed Ben-Gurion's activist policy with few questions asked. He may also have doubted her intellectual ability to fill his place. But the Mapai party leadership, with Ben-Gurion's approval and later Sharett's as well, decided to ask Golda to replace Sharett as head of the Jewish Agency Political Department. She arrived in the Jewish Agency building even before her appointment was formally approved by the party, Histadrut and the Jewish Agency Executive. There were still a number of British policemen sifting through thousands of documents in an effort to prove the link between the Hagannah and the Jewish Agency, thus smearing the latter and justifying the British action against the Yishuv.

Golda's appointment was seen in the Yishuv as a natural development. She was by now a highly known and respected national figure. Only "Hatsofe", the Mizrahi religious party newspaper, decided Sharett's replacement was not respectable: "With all due respect to this wise and energetic woman, she cannot be placed at the head of one of the central instruments of the Jewish people. There is a natural law...it is the eternal Jewish law, there are limits, and each gender must know its limitations".<sup>11</sup> The majority treated this aside with bemused tolerance, and Golda took over the top post of running the affairs of the Yishuv. Formally, the highest authority was Ben-Gurion whom she had to consult on every major

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<sup>11</sup> Hatsofe, 4 July 1946.

move, but in his absence she made most of the day-to-day decisions. Soon ways were found to establish contact with the leaders interned in Latroun. Sharett started sending instructions to the Political Department staff, and this eased the burden on Golda. She sent another detainee, David Remez, “small notes, very feminine, folded at the edges, signed ‘Ruth’.” Years later, Golda Meir, then prime minister of Israel, requested the notes back from Aaron Remez, David’s son. He complied.<sup>12</sup>

The Yishuv now expected retaliation for “Operation Agatha”, even a demonstrative one in view of the fact that some 3,000 Hagannah commanders and men were arrested (including the rising young Palmach officer Yitzhak Rabin) and large quantities of weapons had been lost. On June 30 members of the National Council and Histadrut leadership met in Jerusalem and decided on a policy of noncooperation with the Mandatory regime. Weizmann and Kaplan were totally opposed to this policy and Golda fumed. She was convinced that the only way to express the Yishuv’s anger was to boycott the Palestine administration. She hinted that those opposed might have economic and personal motives, an unkind and untrue comment. She also recommended that the Yishuv cease paying taxes and that Jews resign from various governmental committees and suspend their ties with the local authorities. Her proposal was rejected.<sup>13</sup> Four days later she toned down her views, partly because of Weizmann and Eshkol. On July 3 she addressed the Histadrut Council and said:

I have no doubt that there are possibilities, means and ways, to bring about civil disobedience, noncooperation in many areas...but I know the difficulty, I know the day we embark on this route will be different from the previous day...Something happened in this country...Among us there were many who thought: They will not dare do this to us: In Ireland, in India, in Indonesia, yes, in other places—yes, but not here, not against Jews, not after the annihilation of the six millions, another rude and brutal disappointment.<sup>14</sup>

The British were on the verge of deporting the Yishuv’s leaders but recoiled in view of a wave of protests mainly in America. In the final analysis, “Operation Agatha” failed. The British did not evaluate the situation properly. They failed to understand the Yishuv’s solidarity. They misunderstood the spirit and ethos of the Jewish community as expressed in its media, theater and poetry. They did

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**12** Interview with Aharon Remez in Ma’ariv, 26 February 1988. For details of her letters to Remez see Nechama Douek, “The Secret Love of Golda Meir”, *Yediot Achronot*, 25 April 2008.

**13** Michael Cohen, *Palestine and the Great Powers*, Princeton, 1982, p. 140.

**14** *History of the Hagannah*, Vol. III, p. 1754; see Moshe Braslavsky, *The History of the Israel Labor Movement*, Tel Aviv, 1959, p. 386; see also Rina and Yaacov Sharett, eds., *Arrest with Pencil and Paper*, Tel Aviv, 2000.



not understand that apart from the elected leadership, the Yishuv had no other leaders. They could have broken the military might of the Yishuv, but at a very heavy price which would mean arresting half the Jewish population and combing the country for weapons. For this they were not prepared. They lacked the will and the resources. In some cases British soldiers had serious misgivings about arresting Jews who a year earlier had fought alongside them against Nazi Germany. Cunningham himself had to admit that the solution to the Palestine problem was political and not military, and made recommendations to London in this spirit.

In early July, Golda was busy encouraging the detainees in a camp near Raffa on the Palestine-Egypt border. This was the second time she visited an internment camp. The first was in 1943 when she went to see the Hagannah prisoner Syrkin. Now she traveled on behalf of the Jewish Agency, the Histadrut's Executive and the entire Yishuv to plead with the thousands interned to cease the hunger strike they had declared. She had barely warmed her seat in the Political Department when the Irgun blew up the southern wing of the "King David" hotel in Jerusalem. This operation was planned together with the Hagannah in the framework of the Resistance Movement. The object selected housed the Chief Secretariat and the British military headquarters. The decision was to attack the building in the afternoon, when it would be virtually empty. Instructions in this vein were given to Begin. A few days before the attack, the Hagannah asked for postponement and then backed out of the operation. The Irgun decided to act independently and around midday. On July 22, its people phoned the French Consulate, newspaper and news agencies offices in Jerusalem and even the office of the Chief Secretary, to warn about a bomb that was placed in the building. The Chief Secretary decided to ignore the warning—"the Jews will not dictate our moves", he said. At 12:23 the building collapsed. From the Jewish Agency's building balcony, key members of the Political Department watched with horror. They had known of the earlier planning. When the smoke evaporated and the victims were removed, 91 people had died and scores had been wounded. Some were Mandatory officials, Jews and Arabs as well as British, many of them innocent people. The Yishuv was thunderstruck. Begin could not understand why there were so many casualties—the British had been warned. Curfew was proclaimed and the heads of the Jewish Agency issued a blistering condemnation.<sup>15</sup> On that day the Resistance Movement came to an end. From then on, until the British left Palestine, the Hagannah focused its attention on three goals—continuation of the illegal immigration, large-scale settlement in various parts of the country and

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<sup>15</sup> Nicholas Bethel, *The Palestine Triangle*, Jerusalem, 1979, pp. 203–214.

preparing the force for an inevitable war against the Arabs. The Irgun and Stern continued to attack British personnel and installations.

The attack on the “King David” hotel strengthened those in Britain who demanded an early decision on the future of the country. In a last-ditch effort to hang on to Palestine, the Foreign Office turned to the US State Department and sought once again to coordinate policy on Palestine. Many State Department officials, mostly anti-Zionist, were prepared to cooperate with Britain to demonstrate a united front against the Zionists. But they were not prepared to commit the United States to any action that would involve the use of American soldiers or financial expenditure. The result was a new plan called the Morrison-Grady Plan, named after the British Deputy Prime Minister Herbert Morrison and the American diplomat Henry Grady. Palestine was to be divided into four separate cantons: a Jewish canton to include Galilee and the valleys; a Jerusalem-Bethlehem canton; the Negev and the fourth and largest would be an Arab canton. The High Commissioner would continue to run defense, foreign affairs, finances and the Jerusalem-Bethlehem and Negev cantons. The Arab canton would be closed to Jewish settlement. The plan was rejected by Arabs and Jews alike. But it was obvious that the time had come for the Zionist Movement to make up its mind and seek a realistic solution, at least one that would win the support of President Truman, now eroded because of the impact of the attack on the “King David” hotel. The decision to change the political direction was taken in a special session of the expanded Jewish Agency Executive held in Paris in early August that included delegates from Palestine, Britain and the United States.<sup>16</sup>

The Paris meeting was the turning point in the Zionist political struggle. From Palestine came Rabbi Fishman-Maimon (released from Latroun), Eliezer Schmorak, Kaplan, Eliyahu Dobkin and Golda. Ben-Gurion and Moshe Sneh also attended. They were all under the heavy impact of “Operation Agatha” and the attack on the “King David” hotel, fearing that Britain could now gravely harm the Hagannah and the Yishuv. America’s support for the Zionist cause was tepid, the Russians could not be relied upon and Britain was now openly an enemy. There was also much concern for the fate of hundreds of thousands of Jewish refugees in Displaced Persons camps in Germany and Austria who might despair and return to their countries of origin or try to make their way to the United States. Above all there hovered the threat of a major clash between the weakened Yishuv

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<sup>16</sup> On the discussions in Paris see Yossef Heller, “From Black Saturday to Partition”, in *Zion*, 43, 1978, 3–4, Tel Aviv, pp. 314–361; see also Cohen, *Palestine and the Great Powers*, pp. 143–146; The Paris Conference in the Central Zionist Archives; see also Nahum Goldmann, *The Autobiography of Nahum Goldmann*, New York, 1969, and Meir Avizohar ed. *Ben-Gurion, Towards the End of the Mandate*, pp. 98–152.

and the militarily superior British government. Golda described to her colleagues the situation in the country and compared the searches for weapons to pogroms. She claimed that the behavior of some British soldiers was akin to Nazi behavior and stated that in Degania a Jewish child was beaten by a British soldier wielding a bayonet. When told that the child was a Holocaust survivor, the soldier responded: “Had Hitler completed the job, I would not have to do it.” Golda agreed with Weizmann when she said the British army wanted an outright confrontation and was somewhat disappointed by the passive resistance of the Yishuv. She supported the continuation of the armed resistance while Weizmann was adamantly opposed. He feared this would bring the Yishuv to another Massada reference to the fall of the last center of resistance to the Romans in 74 AD and the suicide of virtually all the defenders. Golda argued that continued resistance might dissuade the British from imposing the Morrison-Grady cantons plan. But a decision had to be made. The veteran Zionist leader Nahum Goldmann arrived from Washington and informed his colleagues that the United States wanted to know what exactly the Zionists wanted and thought that the United States would be prepared to support partition if proposed by the Zionist Executive. Ben-Gurion stated the obvious when he said that while he was opposed to partition, the Zionists must now propose a plan as a basis for negotiations, and was prepared to consider partition on the basis of the 1937 Peel Commission plan with the Negev added. Golda’s initial reaction to the partition idea was now, as in 1937, negative. She was afraid that the territorial basis of the Jewish state would be the Morrison-Grady plan. She felt the world would understand that the Zionists could not accept a tiny province as a basis for negotiations, only an independent state. However, she felt they should not present Truman with ultimatums, and added:

The question is what is our starting point? Kaplan wants a state, but starts by asking for a province. There is danger that all his proposals would be accepted except for the last cardinal point. Truman could say: If you agree to a province, then start with it and do you really believe that the British Government will, in a couple of years time, change its view in our favor and agree to a state...If Truman favors a Jewish state, then we can ask it of him now...

The majority of those present in Paris voted to authorize the Jewish Agency Executive member Nahum Goldmann to proceed to Washington and propose to the Truman administration the creation of a Jewish state in a viable part of the country, the immediate admission of 100,000 refugees and granting autonomy to the Jewish Agency to run that part of the country that would become the Jewish state, including immigration. Golda supported Ben-Gurion’s stance that Goldmann must tell the Americans the Morrison-Grady plan was unacceptable, to discuss in principle the idea of a Jewish state but without entering into territorial details. She and Ben-Gurion were in the minority. Goldmann traveled to

Washington on August 5 and returned to Paris ten days later. He informed his colleagues that the initial State Department reaction to the partition plan was lukewarm but they felt that at least the Zionists had come up with a plan the Americans could support. The Zionists in effect gave up the idea of a Jewish state in the entire country. The Executive agreed that the final decision would be made in the forthcoming 22<sup>nd</sup> Zionist Congress due to be held in Basel in December 1946. Meanwhile Goldmann would continue the contacts with the American administration to win greater support, and indeed, on the eve of Yom Kippur, in October 1946, Truman issued a tepid statement saying that his administration was prepared to support partition.

Another sticky issue in Paris was how to respond to a British Government invitation for talks in London based on the Morrison-Grady plan. Weizmann supported such participation, Ben-Gurion and Golda were vehemently opposed. This, too, would be discussed at the Congress.

Upon her return to Palestine, Golda's task was now to win acceptance for partition within the Mapai party. The decisions that would be adopted by Mapai's supreme body would in effect be those that committed the entire Yishuv. From Paris, Ben-Gurion demanded the continuation of the combined military-diplomatic struggle. Weizmann, Remez, Kaplan and Sharett (from Latroun) opposed its continuation and called for cease-fire. They prevailed and the Jewish Agency Executive decided to suspend the armed struggle. This led to the resignation of the Hagannah's commander Moshe Sneh. Ben-Gurion realized that under the prevailing circumstances, this was the correct decision. Golda supported Ben-Gurion's position and undertook to steer a resolution in this spirit in the Mapai Convention held in September 1946. In her speech, she had to use code language to explain what led to the new policy for which she sought approval.

Ours was a classic movement of construction and creation. This has been, and this remains the basis of our strength. On this we educated generations of youths and pioneers...we pursued this road assured that it was the only course to bring us to our goal...the work of the Labor Movement was based on the knowledge that the fate of the Jewish People's renaissance in its land was linked with Britain that rules the country, and I dare say to you even in these bitter times, that this can still be so. Rarely has the Zionist movement rejected negotiations...we have always clung to any hint of a possibility that we can reach some sort of an agreement, an arrangement that will enable us to continue our work...

Speaking on the main issues that divided her movement from the Revisionists, she said:

More than that: the Labor Movement never wanted to proclaim the final goal of the Zionist Movement. Such a declaration was alien to its spirit, which sees actions and not talk as the main thing. We were compelled to do so only after Britain proclaimed one goal opposed to

Zionist aims...We were not the first to raise the final goal before the entire world, we fought against it...we did not see in this—stating the final goal—a Zionist victory. We considered a Zionist victory an addition to the goal...

And now she turned to the issue of the armed struggle:

Why force? When we despaired of the Labor Government, when we realized that its guiding policy line in the Middle East is its need for quiet in this part of the world, which is why they assumed that the Arabs ought to be appeased because they can cause greater trouble than the Jews; when they realized that the world does not appreciate a force that only creates, but also discovered it can bring about a resolution—we concluded that creation, construction and public relations is not enough...and I want to stress, not instead, but decidedly in addition. When we chose the route of the armed resistance in addition to other avenues, we knew that the physical warlike force will not be the only one that will win. For that our force is insufficient. But we said: using this force can also make us a factor that has to be taken into account. This road achieved its goal...we now need a truce, not to entirely end the struggle...we have absorbed blows and paid a heavy price, and this must be the clear awareness: if we continue on this road, we shall take beatings and pay a price, there is no other way. In other words, there will be need to act through the armed struggle—but in a controlled way...The political leadership must decide when force is to be used, not the military factor.

She then turned to the Hagannah and asked that this wonderful “camp...must... accept with love even this thing, if there is consideration not to act for a while, we don’t act, and impatience, inability to sit and wait...this must never appear as an argument”.<sup>17</sup> When the convention ended, she cabled Ben-Gurion that of the 463 delegates, 340 voted for his policy, 10 against and 21 abstained. “The resolutions are in your spirit,” she informed him.<sup>18</sup>

Meanwhile, the British authorities changed their strategy. When they failed to break the spirit of the organized Yishuv and to locate a “moderate” leadership, they sought new ways which demonstrated their failure to stem the illegal immigration. Since 1945 they tried to prevent the sailing of the rickety boats bearing Holocaust survivors. Aliyah B was a heroic effort organized by the Hagannah, funded by American Jews with the active support and participation of Italian captains and French harbor masters. The British knew that if they stopped the ships on the high seas, they would be violating the law of the seas. The solution was to follow them until they entered Palestinian territorial waters, tow them by force to Haifa port, remove the immigrants and detain them in various detention camps around the country. They failed to prevent their sailings from France and Italy

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<sup>17</sup> Mapai Convention, 6 September 1946; see also Ben-Gurion, *Towards the End of the Mandate*, pp. 153–188.

<sup>18</sup> Bar-Zohar, Ben-Gurion, Vol. I, p. 557.

because the memories of the Holocaust accompanied by growing feelings of guilt were still very fresh in Europe.

In August 1946 they embarked on a new policy—to transfer the immigrants to detention camps in Cyprus. This policy was applied from August 12. Hardly a week went by without heart-wrenching scenes in Haifa port as British soldiers removed women and children from the “shadow fleet” by force and transferred them to floating cages that would take this human cargo to Cyprus. In 1946 24 ships, with 15,000 people on board, arrived. In 1947, the number was 25 ships bearing 35,000 immigrants. In the first two months of 1948, 17 additional ships came with 24,000 people on board. The illegal immigration never stopped, even when it was evident that sooner or later, the immigrants would end up in Cyprus. Hagannah attacks on radar installations and deportation ships achieved little.

Concurrently the Hagannah was involved in another operation. Following anti-Jewish pogroms in the Polish city of Kielce on July 4, 1946 in the course of which 42 Jews were slaughtered, the Hagannah began to organize the flight of tens of thousands of Jews from Eastern European countries—Poland, Romania, Hungary and Czechoslovakia. Their aim was to bring them to the Displaced Persons camps in the American zones of occupation in Germany and Austria. From there, some would be taken by truck, train and even on foot across the Alps to ports of exit in Italy.

The British failed to understand that the Jews were determined to bring to Palestine as many Jews as possible. The Arabs were quick to grasp the implications of the Zionist immigration policy, especially when they realized that in 1946 there were already some 620,000 Jews in the country, as compared to 1,200,000 Arabs. The Hagannah began to provide military training to young Jews in the camps in Germany and Cyprus. Soon it became evident that on the crucial issue of illegal immigration, the British lost the battle. This action united the Yishuv with the rest of world Jewry. It was a humanitarian deed with vast moral implications. It was documented by scores of mainly American writers and journalists who accompanied the ships and reported the dramas they witnessed.

The third route undertaken by the Yishuv in those days was in the sphere of settling the land. Golda was lucky to be among those who approved, on September 30, 1946, in her capacity of Acting Head of the Political Department, the establishment of 11 new settlements in the Negev. The decision was adopted on September 24 as a reaction to the Morrison-Grady plan, whose intent had partly been to remove the Jews completely from the Negev. The Jewish Agency was determined to demonstrate that the country could not be parcelled into cantons. This time, Golda did not inform the Mandatory Government prior to the deed. The operation took place at the end of Yom Kippur, October 6, 1946, and implemented

with military precision.<sup>19</sup> The next day, the British authorities and the Arab neighbours watched with disbelief the new settlements, but they were powerless to do anything against the new facts on the ground that were legal, even by the 1939 White Paper standards. This was a major moral victory for the Yishuv. A year later, it became evident how important this operation was—the northern Negev was to be included in the area of the Jewish state under the UN partition plan. These settlements also played a key role in stopping the invasion of the Egyptian army that began a day after Israel declared its independence.

In the fall of 1946, the British realized there was no point in further detaining the heads of the Jewish Agency in Latroun. Having invited the Agency to participate in talks in London on the basis of the Morrison-Grady plan, it was obvious the Yishuv would not accept any invitation prior to the release of its leaders, and they were let free on November 3. Participation in the London talks was a major bone of contention. In a heated discussion in Mapai's Political Committee, Golda spoke vehemently against Jewish participation. But she found herself in the minority. Her position was supported by 8, 16 voted against her. Luckily, this vote had no significance. By now the Yishuv was preparing for the coming Zionist Congress in Basel, and major decisions were to be deferred until that event. Meanwhile, on the eve of the Congress Golda requested the Stern Group and the Irgun to suspend attacks on the British until the conclusion of the Congress and for two additional months if there were to be talks with the British Government. Her argument was that such attacks would only give the British an excuse to reject all Zionist demands claiming that first the Yishuv must repress all terrorist activities.<sup>20</sup>

When Sharett returned to his post in Jerusalem, Golda went back to hers in the Histadrut in Tel Aviv. Her baptism of fire in Zionist diplomacy was highly successful.

It was, indeed, a very intense period in the course of which certain fateful decisions were adopted, the key one the decision to give up claims to all of Palestine (the Biltmore Plan) and accept partition. Golda was now a familiar figure in the country and overseas. Her name began to appear in British and American diplomatic documents and the international media. She also learned how to work with the staff of the Political Department that was the core of the future Israel Foreign Ministry. The way she fulfilled her tasks was marked by simplicity, charm and tact. But it must be recalled that the policy was determined by others,

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<sup>19</sup> Oren, *Settlement in Years of Struggle*, p. 175; Yossef Weitz, *Diary*, p. 117.

<sup>20</sup> *History of the Hagannah*, p. 912; for the response of Lechi, see Central Zionist Archives, S/25/5677.

chiefly by Ben-Gurion, and partially by Weizmann. Sharett was also sending daily instructions from Latroun for his colleagues to implement, sometimes even without telling Golda, nominally their superior. She found herself locked unwillingly in the struggle between the two senior leaders of the movement, old and sick Weizmann and sprightly and determined Ben-Gurion, whose line she supported as one of his most loyal retainers. She continued to admire Weizmann for his past achievements, wisdom and humanism and enjoyed her conversations with the grand old man conducted mainly in Yiddish, a language of which Weizmann was a master.

She had climbed another rung in the ladder of positions and responsibilities. She was now an integral part of the national leadership, almost on the same level as Remez, Kaplan, Sharett and the rest of the members of the Zionist Executive. Her ascension was natural and did not elicit much opposition (apart from the ultra-Orthodox). The four months during which she replaced Sharett only confirmed her senior position and to her colleagues in the Histadrut leadership it became evident that her days in that body were numbered and that soon she would be called upon to fulfill senior posts in the state about to be born. Their admiration and respect for her only grew. They admired her ability to convince others and to listen to their case, although she made up her mind in advance. They saw how she prepared herself for discussions, marshalling facts, figures, and arguments. Few claimed that Golda grew intellectually. Neither did she offer major strategic policy changes. Ben-Gurion decided the policy, and she looked after popularizing his ideas and convincing opponents. She excelled in public relations. Since the harnessing of friendly international public opinion now became a major task, Golda played a central role. It was natural, therefore, that her voice would carry weight in the coming Zionist Congress.

The Congress had to decide on a number of key issues: participation in the London talks; resumption of the armed struggle as one way of fighting the British and the re-election of Dr. Chaim Weizmann as President of the World Zionist Organization. On the eve of the Congress's opening, Golda addressed the World Union of Poalei Zion delegates. By then it was starkly evident what the Holocaust had wrought to the Jewish People and the Zionist Movement. From conversations with survivors in Basel, the delegates from Palestine realized that Eastern European Jewry, the strongest base of the Labor Movement, had been totally destroyed. The Labor Movement did not have solid foundation in the United States, as Golda knew well. The outstanding American Jewish leaders, Rabbis Stephen Wise and Abba Hillel Silver, did not come from this camp and Labor feared they were hostile to it. Golda thought that Silver was more dangerous than Jabotinsky because he controlled the money that funded the operations of the Agency and the Haganah. The Mapai leaders knew they must ensure the re-election of Ben-Gurion



as Chairman of the Jewish Agency Executive and prevent the American leaders from pushing for the re-election of Weizmann and adopting his line, which called for reaching an understanding with Britain at all costs. In the meeting with the Poalei Zion delegates Golda was brief and terse: the attempts to reach an understanding with Britain by diplomacy had been exhausted, the time had now come to use force, lest the British think that the Zionists have acquiesced to their policy. Armed struggle is a political tool, part of the negotiating process. Another reason for the armed struggle was to show that the Yishuv leadership was not passively leaving the field to the Irgun and Lechi. This would add to the strength of these two secessionist organizations. They would increase their strength if the others remained passive, she said. The Yishuv should no longer absorb British acts of brutality. Golda added that if you asked any member of the Yishuv whether he agreed to acts of terror, he would say yes, at least Irgun and Lechi were doing something. The Labor movement must do the same, it was both necessary and moral. She cited the establishment of the 11 Negev settlements as an example of the struggle and felt that in the absence of armed struggle there might come a time when the British would not permit the establishment of new settlements.<sup>21</sup>

Her speech showed a change in her attitude to the two dissident groups. If, at one time, she agreed to cooperate with them, it was under the assumption that their acts could be controlled or at least supervised. Now that the Resistance Movement no longer existed, she and her colleagues feared that the dissidents would be able to recruit a growing number of young people craving action and would inculcate them with their right-wing, nationalist, anti-Labor ideology. At some point they could endanger the Labor Movement's hegemony in the Yishuv, and this had to be resisted. This was not the first time the organized Yishuv fought against the secessionists. In late 1944 and in 1945, an era known as the "season", the Hagannah handed over Irgun and Lechi fighters to the Mandatory authorities. Now, after a year of the Resistance Movement, it would be harder if not impossible to repeat the "season". Golda also feared that major terrorist acts by any organization, be it the Hagannah, Irgun or Lechi, might lead to the physical destruction of the Yishuv and the end of the Zionist dream. The moderates therefore called for accepting the invitation to the London talks. In any case, they argued, the Arabs would reject the Morrison-Grady plan, so why should the Jews appear as obstructionists. The struggle should go on, but by "constructive means", to ensure the entrenchment of the Yishuv's infrastructure under British protection.

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<sup>21</sup> Golda Meir speech to the World Union faction on 5 December 1946; see also Gorny, *Partnership and Conflict*, pp. 177–178.

On December 11 Golda addressed the Congress plenary. Speaking in Yiddish, she heaped praise on the new wonderful and great Sabra generation that carried new immigrants to the shores of Palestine as though they were members of their own families. A blistering attack on the British who stood between the Palestine Jews and the millions of Jews lost in Europe followed. She also attacked the secessionists for causing dissension in the Zionist movement. The bulk of her speech was devoted to the question

why are we seeking the establishment of a Jewish state now. When did it become evident that we must assume total control over our lives, of immigration, that it must be in the hands of Jews not as a distant goal but as a matter of supreme urgency:

It became evident right after the war, and the actions of the Yishuv focused in the spheres of immigration. It is impossible for us to go on in this manner and acquiesce to the fact that our desire to rescue, to build and to bring Jews to Palestine should be entirely dependent on others. And it became obvious to us that a state was a necessity for us, not as a last resort but as an immediate instrument to rescuing Jews and building the country. In spite of what seemed our weakness, we decided to muster all our ability and do two things at the same time. The first was to ceaselessly continue the building of Palestine and the second to persuade England that the Yishuv will fight any attempt to submit the issue of us settling the land to the will of another people, one that will not allow us to bring Jews to Palestine according to the needs of the Jews and the absorptive capacity of the country. We shall not accept any dictate that will throttle our growth.<sup>22</sup>

After describing the events of June 29, 1946 “Operation Agatha”, that became known as “Black Saturday”, she thought the British policy had failed. “Maybe there were disagreements in the Yishuv regarding tactics, but a healthy Jewish sense dictated that when a hand is lifted against our independence, the Jews must close ranks...as for the future, these blows only strengthened our determination to demand full political independence that can be achieved only by the establishment of a Jewish State”.<sup>23</sup>

The Congress was replete with political and personal crises. Ben-Gurion threatened to quit the Congress charging the moderate majority bolstered by the Americans with the “betrayal of Zionism”. When matters came to a head, the Ben-Gurion activist line won. Weizmann was not elected to the post of President of the Zionist Movement, a terrible blow to the aging, frail and half blind leader and the moderate line he represented. On the key matter—participation in the London talks, which in effect meant whether the Yishuv would suspend

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<sup>22</sup> Protocols of the 25<sup>th</sup> Zionist Congress, Jerusalem, 1947, pp. 90–96; see also Ben-Gurion, *Towards the End of the Mandate*, pp. 232–301.

<sup>23</sup> Abba Eban, *An Autobiography (English Version)*, New York, 1977, p. 69.

cooperation with the Mandatory regime or try to reach an understanding with it, the decision was postponed. Golda chaired the key session on this issue that lasted a whole night. Being a good tactician and realizing around 1 a.m. that there was a majority for participation in the London talks, she proposed that the matter be deferred until after the election of a new Jewish Agency Executive. This was rejected by 167 against 158. She then proposed a resolution saying the Congress noted the resolutions adopted by the Executive in Paris in August 1946 regarding the London talks. The Congress thus confirmed the Executive's refusal to enter into talks on the basis of the original or any other version of the Morrison-Grady plan. The Congress authorized the Executive to decide on participating in the London talks and determined that if the decision was positive, the Executive would be authorized to negotiate only on the basis of the immediate rescinding of the 1939 White Paper, assuring free immigration and extensive settlement and the true implementation of the Mandate as long as it remained in force, and to ensure the establishment of a Jewish state. This was approved by a majority of 171. The tactic paid off. The decision would now be in the hands of a small body controlled by Ben-Gurion instead of in the hands of a large body. Golda also neutralized the influence of the American Zionists. The next Executive would be mainly made up of Yishuv leaders. The Congress also witnessed a strange coalition between American Zionists and the majority of the Poalei Zion delegates who were moderates. The Yishuv's almost total dependence on American Jewish funds was also clear, and Ben-Gurion and his colleagues were careful in their speeches not to attack the Americans.

Few were happy with the Congress's decisions. Weizmann, deeply offended, returned to London. Ben-Gurion knew his policy did not have an impressive majority. But this was not the time for philosophical meditations on the next moves in the struggle. In addition to serving as the Chairman of the Executive, Ben-Gurion assumed the defense portfolio. On December 28, 1946, Sharett proposed that Mrs. Golda Meyerson be elected as a full-fledged member of the Zionist Executive and co-head of the Political Department of the Jewish Agency. The other co-head, Sharett, would go to America and take over responsibility for Zionist diplomacy there, while Golda would remain in Jerusalem and maintain the ties with the Mandatory regime while dealing with other daily matters. She now moved to a spacious apartment rented from a wealthy Jerusalem businessman, across the street from the Jewish Agency building. A car and chauffeur were at her disposal as well as a monthly expense account of 25 Palestine pounds. While she spent weekends in Tel Aviv, Jerusalem would be the arena of her work for the next fateful year. Jerusalem, where she had known poverty and much unhappiness twenty years earlier, smiled on her in spite of being carved up in security zones in which the British officials and soldiers tried to carry on their work. These areas,

surrounded by barbed wire, became known as “Bevingrads”. Nightly curfew was a way of life mainly in the Jewish parts of town. But life continued, cinemas functioned, restaurants were busy and theaters and even the Philharmonic Orchestra performed in Jerusalem at least once a month. The campus of the Hebrew University on Mount Scopus was full of life. But virtually every night there was noise of shooting and explosions, sirens wailing, police cars chasing attackers, most of them Jews.

Jerusalem became the central arena for the dissident organizations, while the Hagannah refrained from any action in the capital. Hardly a day passed without some action. The Irgun and Stern were determined to prevent any rapprochement between the organized Yishuv and the British authorities. The Jewish Agency Executive decided to enter into talks in London. On January 7, 1947, Golda met with the Chief Secretary and informed him of the Congress’s decisions. He asked for the Agency’s cooperation in the prevention of terror lest it be accused of encouraging it. Golda wondered aloud if the British were not seeking excuses to hurt the Yishuv.<sup>24</sup> The actions of the secessionists provided them with ample excuses. When an Irgun fighter, Dov Gruner, captured in an Irgun attack on a police station in Ramat Gan, was sentenced to hang, the Irgun kidnapped a British judge and a senior official and threatened to execute them if Gruner was to be hanged. Fuming with anger, the High Commissioner summoned Golda, Kaplan and Rokach and demanded the return of the hostages within 48 hours, else he would declare martial law and suspend whatever remained of civil liberties in the country. Golda realized that the consequences could be disastrous and many years would pass before the Yishuv could recover from the blows that would be rained on it. The Agency ordered the Hagannah to find the hostages and the Irgun released them.<sup>25</sup> Gruner’s execution was temporarily stayed. Now Golda was furious with the secessionists who could have risked the Yishuv’s future. She understood that the British acted out of despair. The more casualties they suffered the more their prestige in the eyes of the Arabs, let alone the Jews, dwindled. In those days Britain was busy completing negotiations with the leaders of the Indian sub-continent that would within eight months see the partition of India into two countries divided on religious and ethnic lines.

The talks in London were held in February and March 1947. Ben-Gurion headed the Jewish Agency’s delegation. The talks were informal. The Arabs refused to negotiate directly with the Jews, and British diplomats moved between

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<sup>24</sup> History of the Hagannah, Vol. III, pp. 913–916; see also the Documents of the Jewish Agency 1945–1947.

<sup>25</sup> History of the Hagannah, Vol. III, p. 920.

the two delegations. The British offer was an improved version of the Morrison-Grady plan. It was rejected by the Jews, while the Arabs demanded the immediate granting of independence to Palestine with majority rule. Britain may have still hoped that the Jews would ask for the continuation of the Mandate, and this was what Ben-Gurion informally suggested to Bevin in a number of meetings, but this was contingent on rescinding the White Paper and returning to the original aims of the Mandate. Ben-Gurion was apparently terrified that Britain would just walk away from Palestine before the Jews had a chance to prepare themselves for the inevitable war against the Arabs.<sup>26</sup>

By then it was clear that Britain, irrevocably weakened by the World War, came to the conclusion they will have to abandon Palestine, a country that had spiralled out of their control. Their problem was when to do so, how, and to whom to transfer power.

As early as 1944, the British Government realized the solution lay in partitioning the land along communal-religious lines. They knew that whatever happened, there would be no dignified British exit and that once they left the Jews and Arabs would start killing each other. Bevin realized that public opinion at home could no longer bear the mounting number of casualties and costs and that continued British presence in Palestine would serve no visible purpose. The need to maintain some 100,000 troops and policemen there was financially ruinous. Britain could have used brute force to break the Yishuv, but that would have imperilled their sense of legitimacy. Britain, deeply in debt, simply could not afford to hold on to its increasingly volatile empire. One way of dealing with the problem was to hand it over to the United Nations, the heir of the League of Nations that had granted the Mandate to Britain. The Americans did not object to the matter of the future government of Palestine being dealt with by the United Nations. Some officials in the Foreign Office and State Department may even have hoped that a renewed Mandate sanctioned by the United Nations would enable Britain to disarm the Hagannah, smash the Irgun and Stern, deport the Jewish leadership and in fact destroy the entire Zionist enterprise in Palestine. Those Jews who remained would have to live under British protection. This view may have banked on the Soviet Union's traditional enmity to Zionism. In January 1947, the British cabinet had already decided to turn over the issue to the United Nations. On April 2 it formally requested the Secretary General of the United Nations to convene a special session of the General Assembly to discuss the future government of Palestine.

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<sup>26</sup> Zvi Ganin, Truman, American Jewry and the Recognition of Israel, New York, 1979, p. 122.

In Palestine the terror continued and on March 14 Golda reported to the Jewish Agency's Executive that the Yishuv was torn between acts of terror and British acts of repression. In March British troops cordoned off Tel Aviv, arrested scores of Hagannah men and searched for arms. The Yishuv was now gearing itself for the coming UN discussion. In the course of a debate in the Histadrut's Executive Council on the future of the country, the left-wing Hashomer Ha'tsair preferred a bi-national state. Golda stated her position plainly: "As long as there is no other basis, the only internationally recognized basis is the Mandate...and we shall have to seek ways to establish a Jewish state." With all her 'sympathy' to the Mandate, "if someone were to come to us and say: leave aside the matter of the final solution, let us continue with the Mandate, I think all of us, some with less and some with greater heartache would have said yes, let us live under it, maybe we have learned a little, maybe the surviving Jews will learn a little, perhaps we shall build in this framework at a faster pace. We would have all gone back to it...But since there is no great trust that this is possible, we have to seek other ways".<sup>27</sup>

But the Yishuv was already thinking ahead of the time towards independence. In March 1947, the Political Department recruited some twenty young men and women who would form the backbone of the future Israeli diplomatic corps. They were trained in a Jerusalem suburb. Among the lecturers was Regina's husband Moshe, who taught history of political Zionism. But above all there hovered great fear of the unknown, and the trauma that suddenly the Jews would have to confront the Arabs with no British protection haunted the Yishuv leadership. They knew the true state of the Hagannah and assumed that it would be unable to stem a massive Arab invasion. They needed time. In those days Ben-Gurion conducted a comprehensive study of the Hagannah's structure, manpower, arms and capabilities. One day, she wrote in her memoirs, Ben-Gurion called her to his office, "I am telling you, he said, I have a feeling I am going mad, what will happen to us"?<sup>28</sup> But the decision was no longer in the Yishuv's hands. In early April the Secretary General of the UN announced that a special session of the General Assembly would convene in New York on April 28. The Palestine question has now become an international issue. Sharett headed the Zionist delegation and established close working relations with the Soviet delegation headed by Andrei Gromyko.

On May 14, Gromyko dropped a bombshell when he announced in the General Assembly that if all other plans failed, his government was now prepared

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<sup>27</sup> Secretariat of the Va'ad Hapoel, 26 March 1947, pp. 137–140.

<sup>28</sup> Meir, *My Life*, p. 112.

to consider partition and the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine as a serious and viable option. The gathering was stunned. This was the first time since the beginning of the Cold War that the two superpowers agreed on a major international issue. The British expectation of a renewed Mandate was shattered. They had failed to take into account Soviet support for a Jewish state. The Arabs were livid and the Yishuv celebrated. The General Assembly constituted a special committee on Palestine (UNSCOP), headed by a Swedish Supreme Court judge, Emil Sandstrum. Its 11 members represented small and medium-size nations. The Arabs committed a fatal error when they announced they would boycott UNSCOP, leaving the arena to the Jews. Sharett returned to Jerusalem and the Political Department staff began to amass vast amounts of documents to be presented to the Commission, due to arrive in the second week of June. Golda was not included among those due to testify, so in early June she flew to Zurich as head of the Mapai delegation to the Socialist International congress. Here she proved once again that when she let her emotions control her actions, the result was a major blunder, as described by an observer:

The main struggle of the Mapai delegation headed by Golda Meir at that Conference was to mobilize support in the confrontation with the policy of the British Labor Government. But Golda Meir's refusal to extend her hand to the anti-Nazi and former concentration camp inmate (Kurt) Schumacher caused much displeasure among the (German) Social-Democratic Party. This insult was not quickly forgotten. Golda Meir herself was for a long time proud of the fact that she voted against the Germans in Zurich, in spite of requests from the British, French and Belgians, and that her vote prevented the admission of the SPD (German Social-Democratic Party). In her eyes at the time every German was a Nazi, and she was angry that Schumacher sought to pass off his party members as righteous, and failed to mention the murder of Jews. She simply could not understand that after all this he had the nerve to approach and ask what we did to him.<sup>29</sup>

When she came home, the Political Department was in the midst of preparations for the arrival of UNSCOP. The key witnesses were to be Weizmann (whose speech was written by the rising young star Abba Eban), Ben-Gurion and Sharett. But the real drama began to unfold away from the YMCA building in Jerusalem where the hearings were held, in fact on the other side of the Mediterranean. On July 11, 1947, an old American ferry boat, called *President Warfield*, was purchased by the Hagannah in Baltimore and set sail from the French port of Sette in the direction of Haifa. It was renamed "Exodus 1947" and on board were some 4500 Jewish immigrants. British efforts to delay the sailing failed, and during the six days' crossing she was followed by British warships and planes. On the sixth day she was

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<sup>29</sup> Shafir, *Extended Hands*, pp. 38–39.

captured and towed to Haifa. This time the British decided on an unusually cruel measure—they would return the refugees to France and from there to Germany. The High Commissioner opposed this inhuman act, but the Foreign Office confirmed the order. On the day of transferring the immigrants to the transport ships due to return them to France, three members of UNSCOP visited Haifa port and witnessed British soldiers dragging Holocaust survivors, men, women and children, by their hair. This time the British went too far, Cyprus was bad enough, but returning Holocaust survivors to France caused a major international scandal.

The Irgun then decided to act on its own, thereby damaging the impact of the “Exodus” affair. On June 29, 1947, the British executed six Irgun members, knowing full well that the Irgun was holding two British sergeants hostages. In response, the Irgun executed the hostages and booby-trapped their bodies. The Yishuv was horrified—this action overshadowed the events of the “Exodus”. On July 31, Golda told the High Commissioner “we have never been so ashamed”. Sir Alan Cunningham asked for the Hagannah’s cooperation in rooting out the Irgun but she refused. He in turn said to her that he could not guarantee that British soldiers would not commit acts of revenge. “You come from America. I think you can assess what may happen in this country if the American army were here. How long can I restrain the army?” he asked. She had no reply.<sup>30</sup>

A week later she vented her anger at the dissidents in a meeting of the Histadrut Executive Committee. When one member asked how they should be dealt with, she used very harsh language:

Perhaps Comrade Lulu would forgive me if I asked him to respect the primitive intelligence of the people around this table more ...This is no longer bearable and more so when the Yishuv is at war with an outside factor, and its hands are tied...All our action and reaction to the Government’s deeds are shackled by them...we must engage in this grave war against the dissidents, we want to undertake strenuous action against them. If the working class will not do so, it will not be done...I am ready to assume that the workers will do so, and that there will be circles in the Yishuv who will prattle about a civil war and the need to maintain Jewish unity.<sup>31</sup>

In mid-August, the Hagannah headquarters issued orders to hunt the dissidents. But external developments overshadowed all this. UNSCOP was now finalizing its recommendations to be presented to the forthcoming regular session of the General Assembly due to take place in mid-September. The impact of the Arab economic boycott that had been in place since 1945, the “Exodus” affair, the

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**30** Report on a meeting with the High Commissioner, Central Zionist Archives S/25/25; History of the Hagannah, Vol. II, p. 927. See also Aviva Halamish, *Exodus—the True Story*, Tel Aviv, 1990.

**31** Secretariat of the Va’ad Hapoeel, 6 August 1947, pp. 28–29.



personal decision of Bevin to return the “Exodus” immigrants to Germany since they refused to land in France, was seen as morally reprehensible and unjustifiable on any account. The experiences of some Committee members in Displaced Persons camps in Europe, and much lobbying and persuasion by the Zionist diplomats, all this led the majority to recommend the termination of the British Mandate, the partitioning of Palestine into Jewish and Arab states and placing Jerusalem under an international regime. The Zionists heaved a sigh of relief. On the Assembly’s agenda was now a proposal calling for the establishment of a Jewish state, although in truncated borders, but still—Jewish sovereignty over a respectable part of the country.

Britain had lost the struggle. Public opinion in Britain now demanded that that country must get out of Palestine even unilaterally, and the sooner the better. The continuation of the Mandate meant huge financial expenditure and cost unnecessary lives. Now that India and Pakistan had won their independence, some in England thought the value of the Suez Canal diminished. They also realized that the Arabs, perhaps more than the Jews at the time, were adamant in their demand that Britain leave Palestine. Both the Jews and the Arabs wanted to see them go. There was no longer any point in staying. The UNSCOP recommendations now gave Britain an honorable way to terminate the Mandate. On September 6, 1947, the Labor Cabinet adopted a secret decision calling for the end of the Mandate and the evacuation of all British forces and civilians no later than August 1948. Having just returned from London, the High Commissioner told Ben-Gurion: “You think we shall not leave the country; I can tell you, I have just been to England. The people will force the Government to evacuate Palestine. The British people are bloody fed up with the whole mess.” A few days later, Golda told the National Council Executive that in the anarchy that would ensue “all we want is a unified camp, so that the British must know that the Yishuv continues its resistance more than ever and there can be no other way but a real unity under one command, one discipline and one way.”<sup>32</sup>

Even prior to the General Assembly meetings, Ben-Gurion determined that an Arab invasion was likely within two years. The Hagannah Intelligence Service thought otherwise. In a memorandum to Golda, one of its chiefs—Reuven Shiloah—expressed his view that the Mufti could attack as early October 1947 and certainly no later than the day of the adoption of the partition plan. In a press conference he convened in early October, the High Commissioner announced Britain’s decision to complete the evacuation of Palestine no later than August 1948.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> History of the Hagannah, Vol. III, p. 959; see also Central Zionist Archives 1/1/7267.

<sup>33</sup> Yoav Galbar, *Kernel for a Regular Army*, Jerusalem, 1986, p. 58.

The Jews were surprised—they had not expected such a tight schedule. In a National Council Executive meeting Golda reacted: “There are some senior officials who intend to organize anarchy in this country. The slogan is: there is no one to transfer things to, and when there is no one to hand things over to, it is necessary that there will be nothing to transfer. They will leave the country in such a state as the High Commissioner said: anarchy, no mail, no railways, no land registry and no money.”<sup>34</sup>

The anxiety over the security situation was evident when Golda met with representatives of Western Galilee settlements on October 16, 1947, who came to ask for more weapons and funds for defense and preparedness. It was clear that the settlements were not ready, and in the case of Galilee, the problem was far more serious because the proposed partition plan placed Western Galilee in the area allotted to the Arab state.<sup>35</sup> On October 21, the “Situation (Emergency) Committee”, created to prepare the Yishuv for the transition to statehood, discussed the Yishuv’s state of preparedness. Ben-Gurion was under the impression that the Hagannah was unable to handle the matter of recruitment and it ought to be taken away from it. As he assessed that the Hagannah was unable to adapt itself rapidly for mass mobilization as required by the situation, he decided to create a new body under a broad public supervision with Golda at its head. The body was named “The Center for Call Up for National Service” and was under the jurisdiction of the Situation Committee. In that meeting Golda proposed a call-up of 20,000 people. Kaplan wondered how the rights of those recruited would be assured. Golda declared that they had to prepare for a general mobilization without stating so publicly and recruit the required number of people. It was decided to recruit the age group 17–25. In addition to her role as the chief liaison with the Mandatory regime, Golda now became deeply involved with the Yishuv’s defense preparations.<sup>36</sup>

On October 29, a month before the adoption of the partition resolution, Golda spoke to the Histadrut’s Executive Committee and explained the measures already adopted and what was in store for the Yishuv. She said that the Emergency Committee dealt with two critical issues: preparations for a more comprehensive Arab attack, not only from within the country, but also from the neighboring countries, and how to prepare for the possibility that the British would leave amidst chaos. She related that plans were prepared for both possibilities: either the British

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<sup>34</sup> History of the Hagannah, Vol. III, p. 1195.

<sup>35</sup> Central Zionist Archives, S/25/7721.

<sup>36</sup> Yoav Galbar, *Why was the Palmach Dismantled?* Tel Aviv, 1986; see also Central Zionist Archives S/25/7414.

would leave precipitously without an orderly transfer of power or there would be an orderly transfer of power. She assumed that the Mufti wanted to provoke the Jews, thereby giving him an excuse to ask the neighboring Arab countries to intervene. “We have to prepare with all our might to indicate to the Mufti that the Jews are responding and it would be impossible to harm them. However, all this has to be done with without much entanglement. The British announcement that they were leaving may have been designed to have the Jews, Arabs and maybe even the Americans ask them to remain. But this did not happen”. She assumed the British would not leave at once, they had too many interests there, and unorderly departure could endanger them and result in huge losses. She also announced a call-up of 40,000 men and women.<sup>37</sup>

In an effort to bring additional forces to the beleaguered country, the Jewish Agency Executive decided to try and speed up the immigration of babies born to the Jewish internees in Cyprus with their parents. Cunningham did not object. The problem was how to convince refugees who were in Cyprus more than ten months to give up their place in favor of those with babies. Golda undertook the mission of persuading them and flew to Cyprus on November 10. The camp commander was not sure about her identity, but upon receiving orders from Jerusalem that included the warning that Mrs. Meyerson had to be treated carefully as she was a tough lady, he opened the gates of the camps. To her consternation, she was “greeted by a violent demonstration, with shouts and threats. She barely escaped with the help of the Hagannah people there.” But her mission was successful and in January 1948 scores of couples came to the country legally. The fathers were immediately mobilized.<sup>38</sup>

Upon her return to Jerusalem, she began to prepare for another crucial meeting—with the Jordanian monarch. Ben-Gurion and his advisers on Arab affairs had long ago reached the conclusion that a deal would have to be struck with King Abdullah once the partition plan was adopted. Two weeks before the conclusion of the UN discussions, the “Arabists” of the Political Department thought the time had come to talk directly with the king. Some of them, Sharett, Sasson and Danin, had met the king on numerous occasions, either in Amman or in Jerusalem. They assumed that Abdullah was the only Arab leader who was prepared to consider co-existence with the future Jewish State, as he would see it as an ally against the Mufti of Jerusalem. Abdullah had long ago dreamed of the creation of a greater Palestine that would include Trans-Jordan, Syria, Lebanon,

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<sup>37</sup> Secretariat of the Va'ad Hapoel, 29 October 1947, pp. 134–139.

<sup>38</sup> David Sha'ari, *Expulsion to Cyprus, 1946–1949*, Tel Aviv, 1981, p. 152; *History of the Haganah*, Vol. III, p. 1368.

and of course Palestine. Abdullah was also aware of Syrian plans to create Greater Syria to include Syria, Lebanon, Trans-Jordan and Palestine. The only ones who had no territorial demands of the king were the Zionist leaders, apart from the Revisionists. They were ready to accept a Jewish state in a large part of Western Palestine. Abdullah's strategy was to bring all of Palestine under his rule and give the Jews autonomy in areas where they lived. He even entertained dreams of a vast Arab empire, including Syria and extending all the way to Iraq. The contacts between Abdullah and the Yishuv's leaders intensified after 1945. Some of them even attended his crowning as king of Jordan in Amman in May 1946. The time had now come to divine his intentions and hear from him what he and other Arab leaders had in mind.

Ben-Gurion requested Avraham Ruttenberg, the head of the Electric Company, to arrange a meeting. Ruttenberg knew the king well and the request was not seen as odd. As he was leaving for England, he asked the head of the power station in Naharayim, on the Palestine-Jordan border, Avraham Daskal, to organize the meeting. Daskal was a regular visitor at the king's palace in Amman and was often used by the Agency for various purposes. The problem was: would the king be willing to meet a woman. Daskal persuaded the king to accept the following scenario: Mrs. Ruttenberg would host Golda, Sasson and Danin for lunch at the home of Daskal. At the same time the king and his Privy Councillor Muhammed Zbaiti would have lunch in a nearby home belonging to Zbaiti. After lunch the king would complain of a headache and would retire to rest in the Electric Company's guest house where he would meet the Jewish representative. He was not told it would be Golda. He expected Sharett.<sup>39</sup>

She was tense ahead of the meeting. She knew the king expected Sharett and only that morning was he told that Sharett was in New York and he would meet her. On November 17 the scenario was played out and each actor fulfilled his role as expected. The meeting lasted for 50 minutes and notes were taken by Danin. The king opened by saying he was pleased with the meeting although somewhat surprised by her presence. He was told that in view of the importance the Jews ascribed to the meeting, they had asked their "highest authority" to represent them. The king said he deeply appreciated the fact that someone came instead of Sharett and invited Golda to pay him an official visit in Amman. The king then said he was thinking aloud. As partition was being discussed he wanted to hear the Jewish position. From his contacts with Arab heads of state he was convinced he was the strongest and his army the best. All agreed that the Palestine problem took first priority, but he had not yet given up on the idea of Greater Syria. He told

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<sup>39</sup> Interview with Hannah Daskal on Israel Television, 20 October 1982.

Golda that there had never been an Arab-Jewish conflict but a conflict between the Arabs and the British who brought the Jews, and between the Jews and the British because the latter did not fulfill their promises to the Jews.

I am now convinced that the British are leaving and that we and you will remain face to face, any clash will be detrimental to both...At the time we discussed partition. I agree to partition that will not shame us before the Arab world when I appear to defend it. I want to throw in an idea for a future thought of a Hebrew independent republic in parts of Palestine within the Trans Jordanian state that will comprise both parts of Trans-Jordan headed by myself and in it the economy, the army and the legislatures will be joint.

He stressed that the Jews would not live under Jordanian rule but be part of the Jordanian monarchy. He did not press for an answer but said that in such a state he would be able to extend its borders to include Greater Syria and maybe even Saudi Arabia. Golda and her associates explained that the matter was now being discussed in the UN and if there was a decision to create two states in Palestine they wanted to discuss an agreement based on the partition plan. The king agreed and proposed a meeting to discuss ways of cooperation once a decision was adopted. The critical question that he posed was what would be the attitude of the Jews to his attempt to seize the Arab parts of Palestine. Golda said the Jews would view this with favor, especially “if he will not interfere with the establishment of our state and will not cause a clash between us and his forces and especially if this will be done through a declaration—they will succeed in creating a government in that part.” The king said he did not want the creation of another Arab state that would interfere with his plans, but wanted that part of Palestine for himself. He refused the Jewish idea of a referendum in the heavily populated Arab parts of the country where he had certain influence.

The king then raised the question of who would implement the UN resolutions in view of Britain’s determination to leave the country without lending a hand to implementing partition. Golda said that since the Jews demanded British withdrawal, they would be forced to ask for the stationing of an international force. If the British showed goodwill, the Jews would not object to them sincerely and truly implementing the UN resolutions. Abdullah said the British told him they no longer had any interest in the country. He preferred that Britain would implement the partition and an international force be constituted as second best. He hoped that an international force would guard the Palestine borders with Syria and Lebanon and not the Arab-Jewish frontiers in the country. He assumed that the Syrians and Lebanese would not attack an international force. He was prepared to guard the Arab-Jewish borders from attacks, mainly by the Mufti’s

men. As for the Mufti, “there is need for him that he will leave this world”. Abdullah informed Golda that he advised the Iraqis that he would not permit their army to cross into his country on their way to Palestine and he would not participate in any military action if things were not centered in Jordan for the purposes of keeping law and order and finding common language with Jews. He thanked the Jews for advising him of new Mufti provocations. The report of the meeting concluded with the following words:

Unlike previous discussions—he looked encouraged and tough. He became stronger as though he is in control of the situation. He did not attach much weight to talks of an invasion by Arab states as well as the Mufti’s designs. When we asked at the end of the conversation if we could find common ground, like political, economic, and security and whether he was willing to sign a written agreement— he responded positively and asked for a draft. He emphasised that certain matters could be discussed only after the UN decision and said we shall meet at once after that.

He asked us to restrict media pressure on him and that we prevent as much as possible visits to him by foreign correspondents. He specially requested that the “Jerusalem Post” reduce somewhat its widespread interest in him...and noted we should not pay much attention to his sarcastic declarations, they were the result of compulsion and not of free will.<sup>40</sup>

From this report the Hagannah could assume that the Jordanian Legion would not be a central element in a possible invasion after they installed themselves in the West Bank. Golda may have been impressed with the king, but nothing he said changed her view that the Yishuv must continue its preparations for statehood, whether the king liked it or not. The meeting cannot be termed as negotiations. It was rather an exchange of views. There were no maps or position papers on the table, nor an agenda. The conversation ranged over many issues, but Golda emerged with the feeling that it was a basis for an understanding between the king and the Jewish Agency and that in return for Jewish acquiescence with his taking over the West Bank, perhaps even including Lod and Ramle, he would not interfere with the establishment of a Jewish state.

In the final two weeks before the UN was due to vote on the partition resolution, tension mounted. Would the Jewish Agency delegation be able to muster the two-thirds majority required for the adoption of the resolution? In New York, Weizmann, specially recruited to come to New York to help with his contacts, and Sharett made frantic last-minute efforts to secure the necessary votes. Washington was asked to persuade most of the Latin American nations and others to

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<sup>40</sup> Central Zionist Archives 25/4004, 20 November 1947.

support partition in return for an internationalized Jerusalem which the Jews accepted with a heavy heart.

Golda was not involved in the diplomatic struggle in New York. This was brilliantly orchestrated and conducted by Moshe Sharett and his team. There was in fact not much she could do from Jerusalem and she was content to leave the matter in their capable hands. Her mind was focused on more mundane matters what would happen the day after partition. As early as mid-November, she held a press conference which attracted many Arab journalists, Palestinians as well as some from neighboring Arab countries in addition to local and foreign correspondents. She sought to make the following points:

Q: Are the Jews ready to establish governmental institutions if partition is approved?

A: There would be no shortage of potential members of a Jewish Government. In the first stage, institutions would be created under a provisional government. Elections would then be held for the new state's institutions and a permanent government created.

Q: Would Arabs inside the Jewish State be granted civil rights?

A: Yes. All the inhabitants would have equal rights. The Arabs will have the right to vote and be elected. Women will have the right to vote. Arabic would be the second language.

Q: What will happen if the inhabitants of Nablus will want to move to Tel Aviv? Will you prevent them from doing so?

A: And what will happen if the residents of Tel Aviv will want to move to Nablus? There will be no special laws for certain sections of the population.

Q: Are you expecting bloodshed in the wake of the partition resolution to establish a Jewish state?

A: We never expect bloodshed but we are prepared for it.

Q: What will you call the state—Palestine?

A: I don't know yet. There are several suggestions.

Q: Where will the capital be?

A: That will become clear after the resolution has been adopted. Members of the Executive have several views. Jerusalem has not been ruled out.

Q: What will you do if there is no two-thirds majority in the UN for partition? Is the Jewish Agency preparing an alternative proposal?

A: No. There is no alternative to the simple and just claim to independence for Jews in their own country. We hope and believe that the resolution will be adopted. It is too early to think what will happen if it is not.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Yonah Cohen, *The Siege of Jerusalem*, Los Angeles, 1982, pp. 34–37.

In the late afternoon of November 29, the General Assembly meeting in Flushing Meadows in New York began the final vote, having rejected last-minute attempts by Arab delegations to postpone the vote. No one slept in Palestine that night. Like the rest of the population, Golda sat at home in Jerusalem, glued to the radio, marking by pencil as the voting progressed, ticking off names of countries that appeared in the list she had before her. She was alone. Her daughter was in Revivim, her son studying music in New York. Tension rose. No one was certain how the vote would turn out. The moment France voted for partition, it was becoming evident that the resolution would be adopted, and when the President of the Assembly announced the results—33 for, 13 against, 10 abstentions and one absent—the Yishuv poured into the streets of the big cities in a mass celebration. The Zionist struggle won an international recognition for the right of Jews to their own homeland. The Jews danced in the streets. In the Arab sections, the Arabs huddled in their homes. Their UN delegates openly stated that the resolution was unacceptable, illegal, undemocratic, did not bind them and they would use force to prevent its implementation. Britain announced it would leave Palestine and would not be party to implementing partition.

Ben-Gurion followed the vote in his hotel room in Kalya, on the shores of the Dead Sea. He was not a party to the general excitement. Golda did not sleep a wink that night knowing the implications of the resolution. The next morning, she addressed jubilant crowds gathered in the Jewish Agency compound in Jerusalem. “We are delighted. We are ready for the future. Our hands are extended to our neighbors. The two states can live side by side in peace and cooperation for the benefit of all. Long live the People of Israel”. She knew well these were idle words. The struggle would be determined by a show of force. The crowd sang *Hatikvah*. Shortly afterwards, Hagannah soldiers asked the crowds to disperse quietly. Golda went back to her office. On her desk were congratulatory telegrams from all over the world, including one from Sharett in New York. The diplomatic struggle was enormously successful. It was now clear that the fate of the Jewish state would be determined by a contest of arms.<sup>42</sup>

What were the reasons for the re-emergence of the Jewish State? Who defeated the British? Historians have been grappling with this question since 1948 and have not yet found a comprehensive answer. The answer is highly complex, but it is evident that a small group of Zionists-Socialists, imbued with vision and faith, organizational skills mixed with intellectual acuity and pragmatism, intelligently navigated the struggle. They knew that in order to build an independent Jewish society, they must first create an economic-institutional-moral

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<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 39.



infrastructure based on Socialist principles. Ben-Gurion and his associates understood that the basis of political power rests in the economy. They knew that without Jewish economy there would be no Jewish state. From the Bolsheviks they learned that there can be no political control without control of the economy and that the key to success is a highly disciplined well-organized political party that would lead the labor movement. This movement, headed by Mapai, was the instrument that ensured control of the Yishuv through the control of its various institutions, ranging from the Elected Assembly to the World Zionist Organization. The party's organization somewhat resembled a Soviet "apparatus" in which the party members were rewarded for their support with material benefits in the spheres of employment, housing, education, loans, health services, welfare, sports and culture. The party's members felt they belonged to an elite pioneering group whose concerns encompassed not only social and economic benefits, but national goals as well. A student of the Israel Labor Movement wrote:

The spiritual hegemony of Mapai was based on certain basic tenets, which it succeeded in inculcating in the Palestinian society as a whole. The first was the national principle in its Zionist version. The national ideology preferred the collective interest of the nation over the desires of the individual. The end of private property and the preference for the cooperative economy is an expression of the Socialist-Collectivist ideology. Mapai succeeded in combining the national-Zionist view with the Socialist-Collectivist one. In the Palestinian reality this meant that in the settlements, kibbutzim, moshavim and the Histadrut, the Zionist-Socialist ideology came into expression. According to this view, the party of the pioneers, Mapai, which ruled these organizations, would eventually achieve the Zionist idea and create a Jewish state.

Even the democratic idea was accepted in the Yishuv in its collectivist version as interpreted by the socialist leaders of Mapai—meaning, free elections that ensure majority rule. This is the collectivist version of democracy. The liberal-individualistic aspect of democratic ideology that stresses the rights of the individual and of the minority against the majority's will, were pushed aside. The basic value of the new society was the formal or procedural democracy and not the liberal democracy.<sup>43</sup>

Mapai and the Histadrut were led by a highly centralized bureaucracy headed by the Yishuv's leadership. This group was comprised mainly of those who came in the Second Aliyah, but opened its gates to those who came in the Third Aliyah and became active in these frameworks. Their aim was to strengthen the Yishuv, the Movement, the Histadrut and the party. In addition to these high ideals, they had other, less lofty hopes of improving their own standard of living, higher salaries, expense accounts and promotion. Promotion came as a result of loyalty to the party leaders who believed that the people required guidance and must not be left

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<sup>43</sup> Yonatan Shapira, *Elite without Successors*, Tel Aviv, 1984, pp. 25–26.

to their own devices. They feared that politics of the street would result in anarchy. This was the main cause for fighting Revisionism. The Revisionists, they claimed, appealed to the masses and sought at times to create anarchy. Mapai's heads thought in terms of a guided democracy, individual rights counted little. What counted was the collective, the Movement and the Yishuv. They were democratic, but their approach to elections was not basically democratic. There was a need to hold elections, but these had to be carefully prepared to ensure majority rule. For that purpose they planted suitable people in the central institutions and selected the right candidates through a body known as the Appointments or Nominating Committee. This was classical "smoke-filled room" politics in the American style.

During the thirty years of the British Mandate, Mapai's heads succeeded in winning the support of other factors in the Yishuv, such as the religious Mizrahi Movement and the party called New Aliyah, comprising mostly of immigrants who came from Germany, Austria and Czechoslovakia. In this way Mapai created a coalition that ensured the unity of the Yishuv around key issues: the need for a Jewish State, free immigration, religious tolerance, a democratic system and subjecting the armed forces to the elected civilian authority. The Yishuv slowly built its governing institutions and its defense force. It was able to obtain the needed resources voluntarily and allowed its leaders to gather experience in parliamentary frameworks and administering large bureaucratic systems as well as in diplomacy and foreign policy. The Mandate era was crucial for the Yishuv, as it enabled it to focus on building and development under the central and dominant factor—Mapai. Mapai's dominance can be ascribed to its ability to penetrate

all social strata in the Yishuv and the inability of other parties to organize around them a meaningful social layer. Even the cultural establishment—writers and poets—many of whom were linked abroad with centrist Zionist parties, accepted in the Yishuv the spiritual dominance of the Labor Movement and Mapai. They were also convinced that the right path to national renaissance of the Jewish people, culturally and politically, was the way of Labor and its leaders. Mapai's dominance was expressed in its ability to win more votes in elections than other parties among all age groups, social classes, ethnic groups and professionals...The dominant power of the party in the political arena helped the party organization to link it with a large number of economic and social organizations in return for material and ideological benefits. The linkage with these organizations ensured its continued electoral dominance.<sup>44</sup>

This was the social-political environment in which Golda Meir operated, where she obtained her experience and honed her political skills. She became one of

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<sup>44</sup> Yonatan Shapira, *Democracy in Israel*, Ramat Gan, 1977, p. 120; see also Shmuel Eisenstadt, *Israeli Society*, London 1967; Dan Horowitz and Moshe Lissak, *From Yishuv to Statehood—The Jews in Palestine during the Mandate as a Political Commonwealth*, Tel Aviv, 1977.

the pillars of the system she helped to create. Her ideological development, her years in the American Poalei Zion under the influence of her elder sister, and later Merhaviah and the Histadrut, were the best school for her. She became a staunchly loyal member of the Histadrut and the Mapai party bureaucracy. She became a figure on whose responsible shoulders important missions could be entrusted, be it selling stock for a shipping company, dealing with unemployment or recruiting soldiers, culminating in a high-level meeting with King Abdullah. She was never a threat to the veteran leadership and willingly accepted their authority and views with virtually no objection. Rare were the times when she went her own way—the 1937 Peel Commission partition plan was one of them. Very early she tied her political future to Ben-Gurion and was loyal to the man and his policies for decades, even when he belittled her. She never created her own faction in the Histadrut or party and was always considered a loyal member of the Ben-Gurion faction, the central stream in Mapai. As she developed and rose in the ladder of positions and responsibilities, her self-confidence grew and Mapai leaders realized that she was a serious—not superficial as her husband claimed—personality. Her views should be taken seriously and her support required before major decisions could be made. In those days such decisions were made in informal gatherings with no written record or protocols, in order to ensure consensus before submitting the issues for a vote in larger bodies. This was the basis for her future “kitchen cabinet” when she became prime minister.

In those years she developed her own style of personal persuasion that usually worked wonders. She was at her best in small meetings, behind closed doors. There she stated her opinion in simple language. She always found examples taken from her own life and experience or that of her interlocutor’s to strengthen her case. She politely rejected opposition to her views and made sure that every meeting resulted in a decision to act. She never sought to impress people with being overly clever. She was not averse to using slogans like the Jewish People, the Land of Israel and the Labor Movement and socialism in her arguments. When she met with non-Jews, the fate of the Jewish People was her main theme. She did not engage in long monologues and allowed exchange of views. She learned details of the people she would meet in advance: what was their background, what influenced them, what were their desires and aspirations. If it was a party issue, she could hint of promotion, participation in overseas delegation and greater responsibility. If the case involved the attitude of a foreign government, she tried to show how shameful its position was and how wrong. A visit to her office was usually an intimate affair, over a good cup of black coffee, with cigarettes—all to make the visitor feel at home. On occasion she seemed to behave in an affective manner, to express much surprise that governments or people could behave in a certain way. While she was at her best in small

gatherings, she began to address large meetings. As long as she was not tied to a prepared text and looked her audience straight in the eye, it was easy, because then she could be warm, cold, cynical, sarcastic, motherly and sentimental.

Golda Meir had no doubt that it was the Labor Movement that brought the Yishuv to the threshold of establishing the state. This group had to be allowed to continue and lead in the critical years ahead. When the War of Independence erupted, she was ready for any job entrusted to her and hoped to be included among those who would serve in the first government of the Jewish State. She had every reason to believe that her place at the top was assured. Until then she would do, as she always did, her best. Her best qualities were now required as the Yishuv faced its most difficult test.

## 8 My Friends, We Are at War (1947–1948)

The outburst of joy that engulfed the Yishuv after partition was adopted lasted barely twenty-four hours and was shattered when three Jews were killed by Arabs on a bus near Lod airport and Arabs set fire to the Jerusalem business district. Ben-Gurion rushed to Jerusalem and hurried consultations were held in his office, seeking ways to deal with the new situation. The Yishuv realized that this time it was entering into a major struggle not only with the Palestinian Arabs, but also with the Mandatory regime, who at the tail end of its existence was determined not to help the Jews assume governmental responsibility, but to make the transition as difficult as possible. They would maintain their attitude that the Hagannah was an illegal armed organization whose weapons must be confiscated and members arrested. The British policy was that as long as they were in the country, they should be responsible for law and order. This was both positive and negative. Positive because it meant that for the time being there would be no invasion from the neighboring Arab states. Negative because the Hagannah would remain an illegal underground organization and could not bring to bear its power.

During the first ten days after November 29, the Jewish Agency ordered the Hagannah to refrain from any large-scale military initiatives. Even the dissidents held their fire. But when Jewish casualties in the Arab instigated riots mounted, the Agency decided to enter a phase of active defense. This would be the background to Golda Meir's activities in Jerusalem for the next month as Sharett remained in New York to ensure that the UN would not cave into pressures already building in London, Washington and the Arab capitals to reconsider the partition resolution. It was already obvious at that early date that without British cooperation, that resolution could not and would not be implemented peacefully.

On December 1 Golda attended a meeting in Ben-Gurion's office in the Jewish Agency building in Jerusalem to coordinate the Yishuv's reaction to the general strike proclaimed by the Arab Higher Committee to protest against partition. On that day, Ben-Gurion met the High Commissioner and asked for an orderly transfer of power to the hands of the future Jewish government. He also sought clarifications about what the general intentions of the British and their immediate plans were. Ben-Gurion sought to assure food and fuel supplies to the Jews, permission to operate a Jewish radio station and allowing Hagannah personnel to bear arms in self-defense.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> David Ben-Gurion, War Diary, Tel Aviv, 1982, p. 12 (henceforth referred to as War Diary); see also State of Israel, Political and Diplomatic Documents, Jerusalem 1980, pp. 15–17 (henceforth referred to as Political Documents).

A day later, as rioting in Jerusalem worsened, Ben-Gurion ordered the Hagannah to post a bodyguard to Golda, an idea she was not thrilled about but had to abide with.<sup>2</sup> On December 3 she met the Chief Secretary and posed certain demands, among them British withdrawal from Tel Aviv port and the transfer of Saron (a British enclave in Tel Aviv) to Jewish hands. She also asked for British military or police protection to convoys traveling along the Jerusalem-Tel Aviv highway and permission to establish a Jewish militia in Jerusalem. The Chief Secretary responded that he had been assured the strike would be short-lived and it only echoed the Arab's feelings over partition, as against the Jewish joy which he thought was organized by "irresponsible elements". Her demand to allow the Jews to bear arms was rejected. She sarcastically cabled Sharett that the conversation was on the "whole polite."<sup>3</sup>

By December 9 31 Jews had been killed. The Hagannah's reputation as a deterrent force dwindled. British, American and Arab representatives in the UN used the growing number of casualties to show that partition was unworkable and must be replaced by another, more practical solution. From New York Sharett cabled Golda that it was vital she advise Jewish communities throughout the country that the Jews were capable of withstanding the Arab onslaught. He was afraid that panic was spreading among Jews and "our standing in the media was deteriorating. Growing number of casualties compared with the Arabs has a special depressing influence."<sup>4</sup>

On December 9 Ben-Gurion moved to Tel Aviv, from where he would conduct the war, leaving Golda in Jerusalem as the senior liaison officer with the Mandatory authorities.<sup>5</sup> At this point the policy of the Yishuv towards Jerusalem was formulated: it would not be the capital city of the Jewish State, but a spiritual, cultural, scientific and educational center, the seat of the Zionist Movement, focus for world Jewry. On December 3 Ben-Gurion rejected a proposal that the Hagannah occupy Jerusalem. He termed it irresponsible, saying it would anger the rest of the world, mainly America and other Christian nations whose support was vital. But the Hagannah had to prevent the Arabs from seizing the Jewish sections of Jerusalem and to make sure that the Tel-Aviv-Jerusalem highway stay open. The Hagannah was ordered not to initiate military acts unless they were sanctioned by the highest Jewish authority in town—Golda Meyerson.

In addition to ensuring the safety of the 100,000 inhabitants of Jewish Jerusalem, Golda was coopted to Committee B, a body that began to make

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<sup>2</sup> War Diary, p. 20; see also David Ben-Gurion, *The State of Israel Renewed*, Tel Aviv, 1969, p. 109.

<sup>3</sup> Political Documents, p. 31.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 42.

<sup>5</sup> *History of the Hagannah*, Vol. III, p. 1470.

preparations for the establishment of a future Jewish government. This committee focused on harbors, railways, postal services, public works, police and prisons, public transportation, town planning and keeping law and order in Jerusalem. At the end of January she could claim that “at this stage the plans dealing with certain necessary departments were almost completed. We are also concerned with housing these departments and with governance”.<sup>6</sup> In one discussion on the future permanent seat of the Jewish government in view of the projected internationalization of Jerusalem, Ben-Gurion, already then enamoured with the Negev, proposed Kurnub. Golda suggested building a new town on Mount Carmel near Haifa, a sort of a federal city like Washington.<sup>7</sup> But it was too early for such thoughts. Meanwhile they had to concentrate on how to protect the Jewish part of the city. Golda’s mood was expressed in a cable to Sharett after a meeting with the American Consul in Jerusalem: “Have seen Macatee, informed him various instances which to our mind there is a united front of Arabs and Government against us. Impressed upon him how we convinced as ever Hagannah sufficiently strong to fight Arab battle. We have been following policy of restraint which we will not be able to continue much longer and the Hagannah can hurt Arabs much more than they can hurt us”.<sup>8</sup> On December 17 she once again met High Commissioner Cunningham and demanded weapons and convoy protection and complained of searches of Hagannah personnel by British troops. A few days later she reported to Ben-Gurion that a senior British official had told her the British civilian administration might be terminated earlier than planned and she was afraid that Palestine would be handed over to the British army who in turn would hand the country over to Arab soldiers already in Palestine as part of the Arab (Jordanian) Legion commanded by British officers. To Sharett she wrote that British evacuation could be sudden.<sup>9</sup> The Yishuv was deluged by rumors, many of them spread by British and Arabs to sow demoralization and fear among the Jews. She understood this tactic but nevertheless had to report what she heard. On December 26 she advised Sharett: “Informed by serious source administration to cease by February 15. Then the Arabs will start their attack. Have arranged leakage to Herald Tribune”.<sup>10</sup> The matter of leakages was highly sensitive. There were misgivings that if the growing number of Jewish victims was publicized,

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<sup>6</sup> War Diary, p. 42.

<sup>7</sup> Meron Benvenisti, *Facing the Closed Wall*, Jerusalem, 1973, p. 43; Zeev Sherf, *Three Days*, Tel Aviv, 1959, p. 125.

<sup>8</sup> Political Documents, pp. 74–75; Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS), Washington, 1947, Vol. 8, p. 1314.

<sup>9</sup> Political Documents, p. 92.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 110.

this would strengthen the hands of those in London and Washington who were already claiming that the Jews were incapable of setting up their state unless they could obtain American military help. There was some talk in New York over the creation of an international force to help implement partition. But it was clear that the only ones who were ready to participate in such an international force were the Russians. This of course was anathema to American eyes. The last thing they needed at the height of the Cold War was Russian soldiers in Palestine helping the Jews implement partition.

Soon Golda herself experienced the unbearable security situation. On December 26 a convoy in which she and other members of the Jewish Agency Executive were traveling to Tel Aviv was attacked by Arab snipers. Four people were killed and some wounded. Golda was slightly hurt when she opened the door of her car to admit an injured person.<sup>11</sup> A week later, a convoy in which she traveled was stopped by British troops who arrested a young Hagannah girl bearing arms. Golda followed the British troops to Majdal and succeeded in getting her released. In a meeting with the Chief Secretary she expressed her fury at British policy and when Sir Henry Gurney asked her to speak frankly, she did just that:<sup>12</sup> She related her experiences in the convoy and suggested that the Chief Secretary should not rely too much on Arab promises: after all they said the strike would last only three days. He said that he did not trust the Arab Higher Committee but he did believe in the Islamic Council. She said the Hagannah would not shoot unless attacked and asked him whatever happened to British promises to maintain law and order in the country.<sup>13</sup>

It was clear to her that this dialogue of the deaf was a waste of time. The British, having made up their mind to leave, were in the midst of evacuating their troops and civilians and their aim was to get out as fast as they could at minimal cost and with a minimum number of casualties. If the Jews got hurt in the process—too bad. This would be a small price for the humiliation the Hagannah and the dissidents heaped on them since 1944. Golda was helpless in her attempts to convince the British of their responsibility as long as they were in Palestine but realized she must maintain an open line to them until the last minute. Her arguments showed her at her best: she did not beg for mercy and attacked the British where they were vulnerable—their inability or unwillingness to keep the country in a state of peace and quiet. However, if she thought she could take responsibility for all Hagannah actions, she was soon mistaken.

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<sup>11</sup> Aryeh Yitzhaki, *Latroun—The Battle for the Road to Jerusalem*, Vol. I, Tel Aviv, 1982, p. 26.

<sup>12</sup> *History of the Hagannah*, Vol. III, p. 1443; *War Diary*, p. 92.

<sup>13</sup> *Political Documents*, pp. 116–121.



On the night of January 4–5, 1948, the Hagannah blew up the “Semiramis”, a small hotel in the Christain-Arab Katamon section of Jerusalem. It was assumed that it housed the headquarters of Arab gangs that attacked Jewish sections of the city. 14 people were killed that night, including the Vice Consul of Spain. Golda was neither consulted nor asked to approve the attack. Angrily she reprimanded the commander of the Hagannah. He was soon removed from Jerusalem.<sup>14</sup> Her anger was compounded because two days later a cable arrived from Washington signed by Eilat and Eban. They reported the conversations they had with State Department officials and felt the Americans thought most of the attacks that caused many Arab casualties were the result of Jewish initiative. Eilat later added that public esteem for the Hagannah was reduced because of these tactics of retaliation and punishment.<sup>15</sup>

Golda saw Gurney again on January 12, ostensibly to discuss current affairs, but the conversation soon deteriorated to a shouting match. Gurney accused the Jewish Agency of lies and deceits, chauvinism and being suspicious of everything and everybody and thought there was a direct connection between the Agency and the actions of the dissidents. While denying all this, she understood there was not much point in arguing with Gurney, a colonial official who represented an empire in rapid decline. Her job was to keep the channels to the British open and to maintain Jewish presence in Jerusalem, already under mounting attacks.<sup>16</sup> Unexpectedly, all this was to change the next day.

In the course of a discussion in Ben-Gurion’s home in Tel Aviv on January 3, she had already realized the fragility of the Yishuv’s economic situation. Kaplan had just returned from America and reported that American Jews were becoming tired of contributing to what they termed “overseas needs”. They preferred that their contributions go to local needs—to strengthen their own communities. Kaplan estimated that at best seven million dollars could be raised for the Hagannah. Ben-Gurion thought that many American Jews would be ready to contribute directly to the Hagannah, but there was no way that they would get tax exemptions like the ones given for contributions to charitable purposes. The Hagannah could hardly be considered a charitable organization.<sup>17</sup> On January 12, in a further discussion on how to pay for the war, Ben-Gurion realized the growing needs and the meager funds available and noted in his diary: “Perhaps we can mobilize in the country 3 million—in loans, campaigns and goods, we must raise 7 million abroad, mainly in America, and it is imperative that the two of us must

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<sup>14</sup> History of the Hagannah, Vol. III, pp. 1395–1393; War Diary, p. 118.

<sup>15</sup> Political Documents, p. 138.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 154.

<sup>17</sup> War Diary, p. 107.

go to America for that purpose. I shall raise these questions tomorrow in the Executive meeting”.<sup>18</sup> When he said “the two of us”, he meant Kaplan and himself. Golda was totally opposed: “You are vital here and no one can replace you”. She had serious doubts about Kaplan’s ability to raise funds. He was a somber, cold-mannered man, not a figure to arouse excitement and emotions needed for people to open their wallets. He was better suited for meetings of small groups of businessmen and professionals. She suggested that she travel to America for that purpose. It was hard to argue over her qualifications. She may have reached the conclusion that her usefulness in staying in Jerusalem was insignificant compared to her ability to raise the desperately needed funds. In her order of priorities, money for arms was far more important than stale arguments with British officials. She was not sure how she would operate in America as she has not been there for ten years. But her self-confidence impressed Ben-Gurion and he decided to bring the matter to a vote in the Jewish Agency Executive, a formality, but not a routine matter. Usually these things were decided in advance in an informal small gathering. Ben-Gurion may have asked for a vote to save Kaplan from embarrassment. In the Executive meeting at his home Ben-Gurion explained the security needs and later noted in his diary that “it was decided that Golda will travel to America”.<sup>19</sup> In her memoirs she wrote that she set out for New York at once without returning to Jerusalem to take winter clothing.<sup>20</sup>

Other sources do not bear out this simple description. On January 19 she was still in Jerusalem, attending a Jewish Agency Executive meeting in which she spoke with much passion, according to Ben-Gurion’s War Diary, of the need to defend the Negev and called for greater educational work to lift up the Yishuv’s morale. The Negev was obviously close to her heart as well. On January 21, on the eve of her trip to New York, she met Ben-Gurion who gave her instructions for Yehuda Arazi, the senior Hagannah arms buyer: “Obtain jeeps, rockets, fast motor boats, corvettes, inform me weekly what was obtained and what his plans were and see if an aircraft carrier could be purchased”. The last idea was raised by Arazi who thought that the arms acquired in America would be loaded on the carrier that would arrive in Palestine a day after the Mandate lapsed.<sup>21</sup>

She left the country on January 22 and arrived in New York in the midst of a blinding snowstorm. Menachem, then studying music in New York, was the only one to meet her at LaGuardia airport and they proceeded to the “Sulgrave” hotel in Manhattan. She immediately embarked on her mission. On January

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**18** *Ibid.*, p. 139.

**19** *Ibid.*, p. 143.

**20** Meir, *My Life*, p. 71.

**21** War Diary, pp. 164 and 168.

26 she discussed the military-political situation with the American branch of the Jewish Agency Executive. She informed them that military considerations required the creation of a Jewish force numbering at least 20,000, in addition to the 10,000 already mobilized. 3,000 more were required to defend the Negev, assuming this would be the first major area the British evacuated. There was a dire need for tents and blankets for this force, in all some 5.5 million Palestine pounds (or 20 million dollars) were required. It was also imperative to raise additional 50 million dollars mostly for arms. From there she headed for a meeting with the heads of the United Jewish Appeal, where a surprise awaited her.<sup>22</sup>

Since she had not been to America since 1938, she discovered a “new Jewish world”. In the past she had mainly addressed circles of Histadrut and Poalei Zion supporters, who like herself were Eastern European Jews. She addressed them in Yiddish and was happy to raise 100 or 200 dollars for the Histadrut campaign. Now she set herself the astronomic target of 25 million dollars, the sum Kaplan estimated would be enough to see the Yishuv through until August 1948. She knew well that the money raised would determine the Hagannah’s ability to defend the Yishuv and its forthcoming War of Independence. How would she get the money? This time she would have to turn to a new breed of American Jews, as described by her son:

Not Socialist, not back-to-the soil, live-on the-land Zionists, not immigrants, nor even in many cases the children of immigrants and not primarily of Russian but also of German Jewish descent. They were well-established, in some cases fabulously wealthy, hard-working, hard-headed American Jewish industrialists, some ten to fifteen years younger than Golda...<sup>23</sup>

Millions of them were deeply influenced by their experience in the American army in Europe, especially during the last year of the war. Many had seen for themselves the horrors as they entered the death camps replete with corpses and skeletons. Some were guilt-ridden over the passive role played by American Jewish leaders when the greatest massacre of Jews was taking place in Europe. Some felt the gust of the “wings of history” and wanted to be part of the greatest historic event about to unfold in Palestine—the resumption of Jewish sovereignty in their ancient homeland. They all wanted to identify with the struggle against the British and the Arabs and for them Golda symbolized the Yishuv struggling for its life. She also appeared to them like their mothers and grandmothers,

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<sup>22</sup> Eliyahu Eilat, *The Struggle for Statehood*, Vol. II, Tel Aviv, 1982, pp. 518–519.

<sup>23</sup> Meir, *My Mother Golda Meir*, p. 114.

a trait that would be her trademark for years. Several hundred young American Jews had already volunteered for service in the Hagannah and left for Palestine, others became involved in arms purchasing, then illegal, an operation headed by a rising young Jewish Agency Political Department official named Teddy Kollek.

It became evident to her that she would have to use the regular channels, meaning raising funds through the United Jewish Appeal so that the contributions would be tax exempt. A major problem remained—how would the donations be divided. How much would remain in America for local needs, how much was to go to the JDC (Joint Distribution Committee) for work among the survivors in Europe and needy Jewish communities in other parts of the world and how much would go to fund the work of the Jewish Agency, meaning the Hagannah. Golda had no doubts—the bulk must reach the Hagannah. If need be, the UJA should even take out bank loans to be paid by income from the 1949 campaign. Opposition to using funds for the Hagannah arose from the non-Zionist camp and also from some of the federations and UJA professionals who feared for their own position and influence as fewer amounts would be available to their communities. Golda disliked many of the federation professionals from her experiences in the 1930's when they refused to have Yishuv emissaries come to America to help raise funds. She thought they failed to understand the historic moment and therefore her task was to reach the donors directly and bypass the professionals. She sought ways to break the opposition of many professionals to her very presence and her demands that the Hagannah be the largest recipient of the funds.

Among the top professionals, and in a key position, was Henry Montor, the Executive Vice President of the United Jewish Appeal. A Canadian by birth, then 42, he helped Ben-Gurion arrange the meeting with the Jewish industrialists in July 1945. He understood how right Ben-Gurion was then. Now there was need to buy the airplanes, tanks and artillery that Ben-Gurion had spoken of. Montor was deeply impressed by Golda and decided on the strategy of how to best use her presence. She must first be exposed to American Jews through the media and then through the professionals. She must be packaged as an exotic Jewish “Mother Courage”.

On January 24 a briefing for UN correspondents was arranged for her in the UN headquarters in Lake Success. Her words—simple, with no pathos—sounded very convincing. After attacking British policy for its bias and prejudice, the searches for weapons and arrests, deportation of immigrants and preference for the Arab side, she told the journalists: “I have been in Palestine for 27 years. I have seen our Yishuv at various times of difficulty and strife. I have always admired the spirit of our Yishuv. Never have I seen the Yishuv in such a light as I have seen it during these last two months. Our people have no illusions. We know that we

have a very difficult time in front of us. It may last for quite a while. We know all the hardships connected with it”.

She refused to be drawn into stale discussion over resolutions, committees and legal matters. Toward the end of her remarks she sounded somewhat more optimistic: “Now we know that at the end of these riots, not only will there be a cessation of hostilities and the sniping at Jews, but we know that at the end of these riots and maybe before the end of these riots (maybe riots and shooting will go on), we know that before the end of a very short period, there shall be independence and a Jewish State in Palestine. This is something that gives us more hope and more possibilities to go on in the face of great difficulties”. She called on the UN to implement the partition resolution and claimed that if the Arabs wanted, there could be peace in Palestine “in five minutes”. It is unlikely that she believed this last remark, but the press conference achieved its goal. The briefing was widely reported mainly in the Jewish press (and also in the ever important “New York Times”).<sup>24</sup>

She was now ready for the next move. Montor had planned to bring her to Chicago for an appearance before the General Assembly of the Council of Jewish Federations at the end of January. This meeting was, and still is, the most important annual event in the Jewish calendar in America. She was furious to discover that the issue of Palestine was not even included on the agenda: “They have time to talk about inter-religious relations, Jewish education but not on the greatest event in modern Jewish history—the establishment of a Jewish state”, she fumed. This only confirmed her suspicions of those professionals who organized the agenda—they lacked the sense of history she felt. She was certain that given an opportunity to address the Assembly, she would be able to convince the hundreds of delegates. Montor had to work hard to get Palestine and Golda on the agenda. She was briefed: make a short speech, to the point, don’t be emotional, don’t make demands, don’t disturb the mood of those present and don’t annoy the professionals. Chicago was covered under deep snow. She made her way to the conference by train and finally by car and cab.

Those who attended that plenary session remembered her electrifying appearance. Dressed in a simple black dress, she looked to some like an American frontier’s woman from the Wild West. To many she looked like a figure out of the Bible. She spoke quietly, almost melancholically, but armed with her best weapon—her ability to persuade people by simple words spoken from the heart. She had no prepared text. Looking straight at her audience, each had the feeling she was addressing him personally.

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<sup>24</sup> For the transcript of the press conference see Christman, ed., *This is Our Strength*, pp. 37–47

I wanted to say to you friends that the Jewish community in Palestine is going to fight to the very end. If we have arms to fight with, we will fight with those, and if not, we will fight with stones in our hands. I want you to believe me when I say that I came on a special mission to the United States today not to save 700,000 Jews. During the last few years the Jewish People lost six million Jews and it would be an audacity on our part to worry the Jewish people throughout the world because a few hundred thousand Jews were in danger.

This is not the issue. The issue is that if these 700,000 Jews in Palestine can remain alive, then the Jewish people as such is alive and Jewish independence is assured. If these 700,000 people are killed off, then for many centuries, we are through with this dream of a Jewish people and a Jewish homeland.

My friends, we are at war. There is no Jew in Palestine who does not believe that finally we will be victorious. This is the spirit of the country. We have known Arab riots since 1921 and '29 and '36. We know what happened to the Jews of Europe during this last war. And every Jew in the country also knows that within a few months a Jewish state in Palestine will be established. We knew that the price we would have to pay would be the best of our people. There are over 300 Jews killed by now. But there is also no doubt that the spirit of our young people is such that no matter how many Arabs invade the country, their spirit will not falter. However, this valiant spirit alone cannot face rifles and machine guns. Rifles and machine guns without spirit are not worth very much, but spirit without arms can in time be broken with the body.

Our problem is time...the question is what we can get immediately. And when I say immediately, this does not mean next month. It does not mean two months from now. It means now...

I have come here to try to impress Jews in the United States with the fact that within a very short period, a couple of weeks, we must have between 25 and 30 million dollars in cash. In the next two or three weeks we can establish ourselves. Of that we are convinced, and you must have faith. We are sure that we can carry on.

The Egyptian government can vote a budget to aid our antagonists. The Syrian government can do the same. We have no governments. But we have millions of Jews in the Diaspora, and exactly as we have faith in our youngsters in Palestine, I have faith in the Jews in the United States. I believe that they will realize the peril of our situation and will do what they have to do.

I know that what we are asking is not easy. I myself have sometimes been active in various campaigns and fund collections, and I know that collecting a sum such as we I ask at once is not simple. But I have seen our people at home. I have seen them come from their offices to the clinics when we called the community to donate blood for a blood bank to treat the wounded. I have seen them lined up for hours, waiting so that some of their blood can be added to this bank. It is blood plus money that is being given in Palestine...

We are not a better breed, we are not the best Jews of the Jewish people. It so happens that we are there and you are here. I am certain that if you were in Palestine and we were in the United States, you would be doing what we are doing there and you would ask us here to do what you will have to do.

I want to close with paraphrasing one of the greatest speeches that was made during the Second World War—the words of Churchill. I am not exaggerating when I say that the Yishuv in Palestine will fight in the Negev and will fight in the Galilee and will fight on the outskirts of Jerusalem until the very end. You cannot decide whether we should fight or not. We will. The Jewish community in Palestine will raise no white flag for the Mufti. That decision is taken. Nobody can change it. You can only decide one thing: whether we shall be victorious in this fight or whether the Mufti will be victorious. That decision American Jews can make. It has to be made quickly, within hours, within days. I beg of you—don't be too late. Don't be bitterly sorry three months from now for what you failed to do today. The time is now...

I want to thank you again for having given me the opportunity at the conference that I am certain has a full agenda to say these words to you. I leave the platform without any doubt in my mind or my heart that the decision that will be taken by American Jewry will be the same as that which was taken by the Jewish community in Palestine, so that within a few months from now we will all be able to participate not only in the joy of resolving to establish a Jewish state, but in the joy of laying the cornerstone of the Jewish state.<sup>25</sup>

A leader present on that occasion sent the following report to the heads of the United Jewish Appeal:

Every man and woman who was present in Chicago on that Sunday afternoon, January 25, at the Sheraton Hotel, will remember as a momentous event...for thirty-five minutes she spoke. Many were tense as her remarks drove home. Others wept. Not a word did she speak of politics, of ideology, of far-off things. Without emotion, never raising her voice, she told calmly the story of the defense of Jews in Palestine, of their homes and families...Few personalities have ever received the ovation that greeted this woman of valor when she concluded.<sup>26</sup>

The impact of her speech was magnetic. American Jews suddenly began to grasp the new reality, the import of the time and the urgency. She made them identify with the embattled Yishuv. She made them understand the cruel reality of war, of young men and women freezing in remote outposts. It was not a heroic speech in a Churchillian sense, but an anguished call from a mother desperately worried over her children.

From now on Golda was no longer an unknown entity, but the uncrowned queen of American Jews, the woman who harnessed them to action, who found ways to their hearts and pockets. For the next thirty years they followed her almost blindly. In the future very few would dare question her wisdom, challenge her premises and policies. American Jews became one of her the most effective weapons in future confrontations with various American administrations.

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<sup>25</sup> Syrkin, *Golda Meir Speaks Out*, pp. 73–79; Meir, *My Life*, pp. 73–79.

<sup>26</sup> Central Zionist Archives S.2.2.1948/53/1430/

Montor was right. Chicago was the turning point. The doors swung open and invitations to her to address federation meetings poured in. The professionals were convinced that she was a first-rate fundraiser and persuaded their federation heads to ask for Golda instead of the local politician, film star, other celebrity, writer or rabbi. Henry Morgenthau Jr., who served as secretary of the treasury in the four Roosevelt administrations and was now national chairman of the UJA, traveled with her to various cities. His appearance alongside Golda lent even greater weight to her presence. He left center stage to her. The pace was murderous. In each major community she spoke four–five times to various gatherings, held a press conference and was interviewed on radio and television. In one city she almost broke down. At a dinner in Palm Beach, she looked at men dressed in tuxedos and women with the finest jewellery, she thought of the Hagannah boys and girls freezing in the Jerusalem winter. She was convinced that these people did not want to hear about the war. She was wrong: at the conclusion of the event the audience pledged a million and a half dollars, enough, she calculated, to buy warm overcoats for each soldier on the frontline.

The results were stunning. On February 3 she cabled Ben-Gurion that the UJA called on the major federations to take out bank loans worth 50 million dollars. The JDC gave its full support. Until February 1 any income up to 50 million dollars would be equally divided irrespective of the source of the funds. She told Ben-Gurion she still had 12 communities to visit.<sup>27</sup> On February 11 Ben-Gurion noted in his War Diary that Golda advised that to date 15 million were assured, and was hoping that by the end of the month she would have at least 20 million.<sup>28</sup> This information reached Ben-Gurion after he had written her a very bleak and pessimistic letter. After writing that the Yishuv required more vehicles (6 million dollars), naval equipment (4 million dollars) and airplanes (2 million dollars), he added:

After your departure the situation has worsened. There is no longer any doubt that the fighting is now out of the hands of the Palestinian Arabs and is now entirely in the hands of the neighboring countries, their soldiers and officers, who are better equipped (and they are careful not to become a burden on the peasants) with weapons, good weapons—far better than what we have, are well-trained, and I think have an effective strategic plan. I did not make light of this a year ago, and I must say that I view the situation now as far more critical...

In the near future we must view the Yishuv under siege, and we must realize that within the besieged Yishuv there will be especially besieged and isolated enclaves, it is not unlikely that the Negev will be cut off, so will Upper Galilee and Jerusalem...

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<sup>27</sup> War Diary, p. 204.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 232.



Apart from that please arrange urgently 1,500,000 dollars for the purchase of a vessel to take the cargo. Be strong.<sup>29</sup>

Golda used a courier traveling to Palestine to inform Ben-Gurion she had raised 16 million dollars and by the end of the month there would be 20. Part of the money was from the 1947 campaign, part from advance on the 1948 campaign and the rest loans secured by the 1948 campaign income. All this was coordinated with Montor and the Joint Distribution Committee. Golda also announced her intention to return in early March and reported there were several American-Jewish pilots available of whom 20 were ready to leave at very short notice, and she suggested that 15 be invited to do so.<sup>30</sup>

Glowing cables describing her work began to arrive from many sources. Sharett cabled Kaplan: “Golda’s trip has so far netted 10 million. Transfers are arriving daily”. A day later Sharett cabled the Keren Hayesod Executive in Jerusalem: “Four hundred donors participated in the opening dinner in Montreal. In an emotional speech Golda Meyerson described the Yishuv’s travails. 400,000 collected”. Morgenthau soberly informed Kaplan: “Mrs Meyerson did an outstanding job bringing to us the urgency of the situation and in acting to attain 50 million dollars”. Much of the money raised was not sent to Palestine. It was used to buy arms mostly in Europe and some in the United States. Prior to committing themselves to any deal, the Hagannah arms buyers had to check with Golda if the money was available. On February 25, a month after arriving in America, she could report to Ben-Gurion that she was assured of 25 million dollars. A week later Sharett cabled Ben-Gurion: “Golda’s ‘Iron Campaign’ so far 30 million in cash, hope for 40 million”. These sums were above and beyond the wildest dreams of both Golda and Ben-Gurion.<sup>31</sup> The grueling voyage in the American communities was nearing its end. The achievements were highly significant. Ben-Gurion wrote to both Golda and Sharett: “The only ray of light so far is Golda’s success. But this does not change the gravity of the situation. Will the equipment reach us and in time? That is the key question and on it everything hinges”.<sup>32</sup>

But in the midst of her triumphal trip, she suffered a heart-searing disappointment and a major political setback at home, handed to her by none other than her colleagues in the Mapai leadership. In early March the Jewish Agency and National Council Executives decided to set up a governing council to be called, in the finest Eastern European tradition, the People’s Administration,

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 238.

<sup>31</sup> The cables are in the Central Zionist Archives; see also War Diary, p. 274.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 276.

in reality a provisional government numbering 13 members. They would be drawn from a larger body called the People's Council numbering 37, set up as the top legislative body of the Yishuv designed to prepare it for independence. Golda was included among the 37 as a Mapai representative, but Ben-Gurion utterly failed at having her included in the Provisional Government. Mapai was allotted 4 seats of the 13. Clearly the first seat would go to Ben-Gurion, the second to Sharett, the third to Kaplan. The argument was over the fourth. On March 3 members of Mapai's Governmental Committee, including Perleson, Isserson and Aranne, suggested that the party's representatives would be Ben-Gurion, Sharett, Kaplan and Remez. Ben-Gurion stated that he "disputed Golda's absence. It is inconceivable that there shall be no adequate woman...it is a moral and political necessity, for the Yishuv, the Jewish world and the Arab world. This is a banner to the Near East. They did not agree with me and I shall bring it to the Central Committee".

The subject was discussed in four meetings of Mapai's Central Committee. On March 6 Ben-Gurion reiterated his position:

It is imperative that there will be one woman in the small cabinet, firstly because she is suitable, but that is not enough because there are many suitable comrades...I do not know if it's too early to speak about it, that we select the government, we are creating a historic fact. If we don't have the strength, this government will not last long. But we want it to be a historic act. We hope this will be the beginning of Jewish sovereignty in this country after 1800 years...it is inconceivable that half the Yishuv, half of the Jewish people will not be represented in the first government we are trying to establish in the Land of Israel. Women have held their place in immigration, construction, defense and literature, and each one of us is grateful to his mother. I think this matter has enormous political value. It is important for us especially here to stress and show the character of the Jewish Yishuv and the Jewish state in the Middle East. I say that a woman in the first Jewish government is a banner for the entire East...A woman in the Jewish government is a banner for the entire Arab world...and we have a suitable woman who fits not only as a woman...I see a great privilege for our party from whence this woman will come...<sup>33</sup>

At some point he even suggested that she take over his slot, but it was clearly unrealistic and by March 6 Ben-Gurion concluded there was no chance of including Golda in the future provisional government. There is no doubt that he sincerely wanted her there. He had come to appreciate her abilities, character and ceaseless energy. He knew she was loyal to his policies and could be relied upon in any matter. Her achievements in America only strengthened his view that the Yishuv now owed her, more than at any other time, a debt of honor. He may have feared the inclusion of Remez, a very strong personality who could compete with

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<sup>33</sup> Mapai Central Committee, 3 March 1948; Political Documents, pp. 459–462; War Diary, p. 282.

him, especially because he rightly thought that Remez belonged to the camp of the moderates who opposed Ben-Gurion's activism and what Remez occasionally considered Ben-Gurion's dictatorial methods. Golda herself wrote in her memories: "I remember we sat on my balcony overlooking the sea one night early in 1948, talking about what the future might bring, and Remez said to me solemnly: You and Ben-Gurion will smash the last hope of the Jewish People".<sup>34</sup>

Undoubtedly, her absence from the cabinet table strengthened those who could rein and restrain Ben-Gurion. Sharett and Kaplan were not strong enough to challenge him. Remez was seen by the majority of Mapai's leadership as suitable for this task. He was more senior than Golda in the Yishuv's, Histadrut and Mapai hierarchy and headed the National Council Executive. Few of those who voted for Remez knew of her achievements in America and there is no certainty it would have changed their views. The irony was that of the two leaders, the one selected for a position she thought was due to her was Golda's teacher and mentor and intimate friend for almost a quarter of a century. She could derive solace from Ben-Gurion's wholehearted support. She may have been insulted and annoyed that her friends did not have the courtesy of waiting for her to return and lobby for the position before making the selection. The entire affair was not mentioned in her autobiography and in most books written about her, including two by her close friend Marie Syrkin. Many years later she said in an interview she never dreamed of running against Remez. In 1948 there were no primaries in Mapai (or in any other political party in the Yishuv). She chose not to react to this setback publicly and bore her pain in silence.

Meanwhile Ben-Gurion instructed her to remain in America and take part in the diplomatic struggle. He rightly thought that her presence in America was far more important than conducting futile arguments with British officials in Jerusalem. Following a meeting with the High Commissioner on March 8, Ben-Gurion was convinced that the security situation was far more serious than he thought, and it was now imperative that military equipment reach Palestine even with the help of the UN. He feared that "the United States, wittingly or unwittingly, will participate in the plot concocted by the British Foreign Office and the Arab League to destroy the Yishuv". He cabled Sharett instructing him to demand that the United States ask the UN to limit the presence of the British army to certain areas upon the termination of the Mandate and noninterference in internal matters, and above all that they supply us with equipment, otherwise the Yishuv is doomed to extinction.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Meir, *My Life*, p. 113.

<sup>35</sup> *War Diary*, p. 292.

In New York Golda participated in some political work attending meetings of the Jewish Agency's mission to the United Nations and sat in on some Security Council meetings next to Silver and Sharett. But she disliked this type of work. It was hard for her to function as number two or three in a delegation, with no clear-cut responsibility or role. Very soon she came to the conclusion that her place was not in New York, but in the central arena—located in Tel Aviv. She returned to Palestine on March 18, and the next day was plunged into discussions on the military situation. In a meeting headed by Ben-Gurion, with the participation of Yigael Yadin, Yigal Allon, Yisrael Galili, Zvi Ayalon, Yochanan Rattner, Yaacov Dori, Yitzhak Sade, Levi Eshkol and Shaul Avigur, the highest echelon of the Hagannah, all the participants warned of the grave deterioration in the security, economic and social situation.<sup>36</sup>

But it turned out that the situation on the diplomatic front was far worse. On March 19 the United States abandoned partition, when its UN delegate Warren Austin announced that his country wanted to delay the implementation of the partition scheme since it could not be implemented peacefully, the United States now called for the creation of a temporary trusteeship in Palestine upon the termination of the Mandate. The Americans asked for the convening of a special session of the General Assembly to discuss trusteeship. The Truman administration formally caved in to combined Arab, British and also to State and Defense Department pressures. The initial military setbacks of the Yishuv raised doubts about its ability to defend itself by its own means. The Arabs were delighted. The British announced that irrespective of what happens, the Mandate would come to an end on May 15. The Yishuv rejected trusteeship out of hand. In a statement to the press Ben-Gurion said simply:

We shall determine the future of the country. We have laid the foundations for a Jewish state and we shall establish it. The main thing is that we know what we want and act with no hesitation according to the historic will of our people. We shall not agree to any trusteeship, temporary or permanent, not even for the briefest time. We no longer accept foreign rule—whatever type it may be. We shall insist on the quickest termination of the British rule and its departure from the country with no further delays...The Jewish State exists and will exist—if we shall know how to defend it.<sup>37</sup>

These events overshadowed Golda's return to Palestine. There were no welcoming receptions and she was not even asked to report in detail about her achievements in America. If she had any misgivings, she never vented them openly or even privately.

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<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 312.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 313.

On March 20 she attended a Mapai Secretariat meeting and admitted that the United States had dealt the Yishuv a bitter blow. She was not sure that American Jews had much political clout and would be able to alter the new reality. She was not happy that the Jews now enjoyed only Soviet support among the great powers, saying that there was now a Red scare in America and Jews were frightened to be identified with anything that was supported by Russia. Her conclusion was simple: the Yishuv must announce within a day or two that it was setting up a provisional government and continue preparations for independence. She had promised American Jews that the Yishuv would proclaim independence and asked them to contribute money to that end.

These events overshadowed her return to the country. Now there remained 55 days till the end of the Mandate and there was much work to be done. Golda went back to besieged Jerusalem to once again lead the Jewish Agency's Political Department. The staff of this body was now in a state of advanced demoralization. The absence of Golda and Sharett left them rudderless and they understood well that the key decisions were made in Tel-Aviv by Ben-Gurion based on security considerations alone. They thought he needed experienced diplomats next to him. But they were ordered to remain in besieged Jerusalem to deal with the international media, to maintain tenuous ties with the remnants of the Mandatory officials and try to collect snippets of intelligence. This was the origin of the future struggle between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Defense, between two schools of thought in Israeli foreign policy which would have an enormous impact on the future of Israel and the personal relations among its leaders. The senior officials of the Political Department feared that in the absence of any chance to defeat the entire Arab world by military power, "large parts of the Yishuv could face annihilation and we cannot see how we shall overcome even after protracted struggle. Political means have to be sought to prevent such a situation". They suspected that things were determined accidentally or under the influence of changing moods"...how is it possible that the construction of sovereignty will be advanced without the use of workers and departments left in Jerusalem through inexplicable inertia and routine", they asked. The senior staffers thought they were acting merely as a branch of the Jerusalem Community Council.<sup>38</sup>

On March 28 the staff of the Political Department found itself in a state verging on panic. In a top secret cable signed by Chaim Berman, Walter Eytan, Leo Kohn and Eliyahu Sasson, they wrote to Sharett:

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<sup>38</sup> Political Documents, pp. 522–524.

Feel duty-bound to inform you truth about present situation in Jerusalem. Supply and equipment situation verging on catastrophic. After Ezion disaster, bulk of city's armored transport destroyed. Communications with Atarot, Hadassah, even Talpiot problematic. Jerusalem Emergency Committee wholly unequal its task, unable arrange even distribution of available fuel supplies. Large bread queues in all parts of the city. Public morale has sunk to its lowest and dissidents energetically and understandably exploiting situation. All local truce efforts failed owing adamant Arab opposition and international force more than doubtful. We fear this may result citizens taking law into their hands and coming to an arrangement with the British with a view their staying on. Authority of Jewish Agency all but vanished. Urge you do everything possible expedite truce negotiations your end or other settlement to relieve extreme danger threatening Jerusalem.<sup>39</sup>

It is unclear if Golda saw this cable prior to its dispatch or identified with its contents. On March 27 she was still in Tel Aviv and arrived in Jerusalem the next day. One of the reasons for her visit to Jerusalem was Gurney's demand to discuss either with her or with Kaplan the idea of Trusteeship. If the Jews accepted, he said, fine, if they rejected the idea, the British would impose a naval blockade. Ben-Gurion saw no point in entering into discussions with the British on Trusteeship. The problem for him was how to secure truce in Jerusalem. Meanwhile the Hagannah completed its preparations for a major military operation designed to open the road to Jerusalem and relieve the siege.

In Jerusalem Golda realized the gravity of the situation and cabled Ben-Gurion an assessment almost similar to that of the heads of the Political Department:

The situation in Jerusalem has become very serious. The defeat on the Ezion Road undermined public spirit...nervousness due to shortage of fuel and supplies caused panic...voices being heard imperative to request the British to remain in Jerusalem or seek accommodation with the Arabs since armistice or international force are impossible...supreme effort required to renew travel to Tel Aviv, concentration of food supply, consolidation of all Hagannah forces and strong civil leadership in the city.<sup>40</sup>

In New York, Sharett was powerless to bolster the morale of his loyal staff. However at the same time at Hagannah Headquarters in Tel Aviv plans were consolidated to launch a major operation. Hagannah soldiers, equipped with newly arrived weapons from Czechoslovakia, paid for by funds raised by Golda in America, resulted in an operation code named "Nachshon". In early April the Hagannah opened the road to Jerusalem and brought to the city convoys loaded with food and other supplies that enabled the city to hold on for a few more weeks. In other

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 526.

<sup>40</sup> History of the Hagannah, Vol. III, pp. 1403–1404.

lightning operations the Arab sections of the mixed cities of Haifa, Tiberias and Safed were captured. These gains coming after months of searing setbacks raised the Yishuv's morale, but also created a major problem that would haunt Israel ever since—the flight of large number of Palestinians who would become refugees. Some fled because one runs away from battle zones, thinking they would return to their homes at the end of the hostilities. This was the traditional way of doing things in the Middle East. Others fled because they thought their leaders told them to do so in order to clear the way to the coming Arab armies, still others fled because they thought the Jews would do to them what they would have done to the Jews had they won the war. On April 9 an Irgun-Stern operation in the village of Deir Yassin, on the outskirts of Jerusalem, resulted in a huge loss of Arab civilian lives, and intensified the flight of local Palestinians. The Jewish Agency condemned that operation and sent word to King Abdullah that operations like this would not be repeated.

In early April Golda was back in Tel Aviv, this time to attend the sessions of the Zionist General Council that met to support the Yishuv's leaders in their determination to proclaim the Jewish state when the Mandate would lapse. This was the highest governing body of the World Zionist Organization between Congresses. In her absence, the Political Department was once again left without a leader. The situation in Jerusalem, temporarily improved due to operation "Nachshon", soon deteriorated when the Jerusalem–Tel Aviv road was cut off again and Ben-Gurion was deluged with cables from the National Council demanding that he accept a cease-fire in Jerusalem as called for by the United Nations Security Council. A month before the end of the Mandate, Golda discussed the future role of the Political Department with Ben-Gurion. Since the Provisional Government was due to take over the administration of the state from its seat in Tel Aviv, she wondered who would represent the Jewish state in Jerusalem, dealing with the foreign consuls, the UN representatives and the contacts with the Jordanian monarch. Ben-Gurion thought, as he noted in his diary, "Golda should be among the 13 (i. e. Provisional Government), she must run the Agency's Political Department. We don't yet know the fate of the government, and we must maintain the Agency...she must also run the Jerusalem Department on behalf of the Agency'. This was the first time Ben-Gurion explicitly wrote that Golda could replace him or Sharett, a clue as to what would happen years later.<sup>41</sup> Meanwhile she remained in Tel Aviv. On April 13 she was hospitalized because of chest pains. A heart attack was suspected and she was ordered to rest. The pressures of the recent years and especially the last three months took their toll on her. While she was in hospital,

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<sup>41</sup> War Diary, p. 351.

Ben-Gurion met with the senior staff of the Political Department in Jerusalem. He disliked most of them, calling them ‘strange people’. They advised him there was not much point in them remaining in Jerusalem and proposed leaving Golda, a private secretary for her and two officials to deal with the consuls and the Arabs. The rest must go to Tel Aviv, they argued. Ben-Gurion doubted if the time had come to move the Department to Tel Aviv. “Moshe is not yet here, Golda must move here, there is nothing for a foreign ministry in Tel Aviv to do, but Jerusalem is Jerusalem, from a Jewish and an international point of view, and may become the capital of the state”. He may have feared that the departure of many officials and their families from Jerusalem could have adverse effect on the morale of the population. He also did not want officials “wandering around in Tel Aviv poking their noses in other matters”.<sup>42</sup> A day later, the heads of the Department sent Golda a cable asking her “to do the maximum effort while guarding your health and come to Jerusalem, even briefly, to be the mother of this city and run the Department. Request that you take over the administration of political and security matters on behalf of the Jewish Agency Executive. Your words to 100,000 residents will be a source of blessing and encouragement to all of us at this difficult time”.<sup>43</sup> They despaired of Ben-Gurion and knew that Sharett, far away in New York, could do nothing for them. Their only support was Golda. But she was torn: she understood their plight, but did not think that Jerusalem had to be abandoned at this point. She did not believe diplomacy alone would solve the Yishuv’s problems. Its fate would be determined by military force. She knew well that the key decisions would be made in Tel Aviv and wanted to be a party to them. She felt there was not much for her to do in Jerusalem. The future of the Political Department was not her or Ben-Gurion’s top priority.

Meanwhile the Hagannah occupied Haifa on April 22. Tens of thousands of its Arab inhabitants began to flee, ignoring calls by Jewish leaders for them to remain. On April 26 Ben-Gurion summoned Golda. He was under the impression that “for some reason she feels slighted, ready to go to Jerusalem if required to do so—in fact it was already so determined”.<sup>44</sup> The order to proceed to Jerusalem may have compounded her feeling that she was being shunted to a secondary arena. Jerusalem was important and its 100,000 inhabitants needed a leader, but she realized that at best this would be a temporary job. Ben-Gurion asked that she go to Haifa to regulate the ties between the Hagannah and the British army and to coordinate action between the Hagannah and the Jewish civilian authorities.

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<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 363.

<sup>43</sup> For the exact wording see Central Zionist Archives.

<sup>44</sup> War Diary, p. 371.



To her colleagues in the Jewish Agency Executive she reported on May 6 that she went to Haifa to look into basic questions, such as should the Jews make an effort to bring the Arabs back to Haifa and if so, what could happen in other places. “We must not behave badly towards the Arabs so that others will not return”, she said. The visit to Haifa occupies a large space in her memoirs. There is one corroborating testimony. Yossef Almogy, a Histadrut leader in Haifa, wrote in his own memoirs that he accompanied Golda to the Arab section of Wadi Nisnas. Golda stopped near a half-destroyed house from which an old Arab woman emerged bearing the few belongings she was able to rescue from her home. When she saw Golda, she burst into tears. So did Golda. She went back to Tel Aviv utterly dejected. This was the first time she saw an Arab refugee fleeing her home.<sup>45</sup>

The next day she attended another very important discussion called by Ben-Gurion, to decide on the organization of the future Jewish army’s General Headquarters. He wanted to insure that the army would be subservient to civilian authority (i. e. his own) and that there would be no armed militias in the future State of Israel. Mapam’s leaders present, Galili, Bentov and Yitzhak Ben-Aharon, whose influence on the Palmach was almost total, wanted an army based on the pioneering spirit of the Palmach. Ben-Gurion wanted a professional one, modeled on the British army. Golda supported his views, but the discussion was inconclusive.<sup>46</sup>

In the last two weeks of the Mandate, tension rose steadily. Golda flew back to Jerusalem to arrange a truce in the city while ensuring access to it by road, access to the Jewish Quarter in the Old City and restrain the Arab Legion and local Arab armed gangs. The second task was to arrange another meeting with King Abdullah to glean his intentions, something that had now become critical. If the Jordanians stayed out of the planned Arab invasion, the Hagannah would be able to concentrate its thinly stretched forces in the north and south. If he decided otherwise, the Hagannah would have to allocate forces to defend Jerusalem and the country’s heartland. The Arab Legion was stationed in Lod International Airport, barely 15 kilometers from Tel Aviv. The Political Department Arab affairs specialists had kept in touch with the king’s retainers ever since the November 17, 1947 meeting between the king and Golda. Golda thought that in face-to-face conversation she might be able to persuade him to remain out of the circle of the coming war. Ben-Gurion was hardly involved in the contacts with Abdullah, leaving them to Sharett, Sasson and Yaacov Shimoni, a senior Jewish Agency Arabist. When Ben-Gurion heard that Golda wanted to see the king, he

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<sup>45</sup> Yossef Almogy, *In the Weight of the Crossbar*, Tel Aviv, 1980, p. 79.

<sup>46</sup> War Diary, p. 375.

approved and wrote on May 1: “Golda wants to meet the king. She imagines she can influence him. I agreed to the attempt, although I have no great hopes, but it is worth trying to prevent serious developments before or after May 15”.<sup>47</sup> There now remained the details of fixing the time and place for the meeting. It was clear that the king would not come to Naharayim and Golda would have to travel to Amman instead. Until these arrangements were made, she focused her efforts on arranging a truce.

On May 6, she met Cunningham for the last time. Kaplan joined her. Under a hail of bullets they made their way from Rehavia to Government House. The central subject of discussion was assuring free passage to Jerusalem from the coastal plain. The High Commissioner reported the Arabs were ready to guarantee access to the Jewish Quarter and the Western Wall, but refused to allow convoys from Tel Aviv. Golda could not agree to a situation in which the Jews of Jerusalem will be at the mercy of the Arabs for food and fuel supplies.<sup>48</sup> Finally the High Commissioner reiterated that the Mandate would end on May 15 and requested the Jews not to attack in Jerusalem until after the British had departed. The next day Golda sent the High Commissioner a memorandum stating the Jewish Agency could not accept a cease-fire in the Old City unless the siege on the Jewish Quarter was lifted. That was her last contact with the Mandatory regime.<sup>49</sup> The next time she heard from Cunningham was in 1969, when the aging retired general sent a letter advising Israel’s Prime Minister Golda Meir not to withdraw from areas Israel captured in the Six Days War without proper guarantees.

In early May, Ben-Gurion telephoned Avraham Ruttenberg, head of the Electric Company, and asked him to once again arrange a meeting with the king. Golda went, as there was no chance that Sharett would make it back to the country in time for the meeting. Ruttenberg and Daskal traveled to Amman on May 7 to persuade the king to meet Golda. Ben-Gurion was by now convinced that the meeting would have moral significance. The king would not be able to claim that he had not been warned of the consequences of going to war. Abdullah told the two Electric Company heads that his hands were now tied, but agreed to meet Golda not in his palace, but in the home of his chief retainer Zbaiti. Ben-Gurion ordered a plane be sent to Jerusalem to fetch Golda. She packed her few belongings with the help of her childhood friend Regina and Esther Herlitz, a Political Department staffer. Before meeting the king, she and Ben-Gurion decided on the following position: “An agreement based on the UN resolution; Mutual border rectification”.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.* p. 382.

<sup>48</sup> Political Documents, pp. 744–746.

<sup>49</sup> Meir, *My Life*, p. 151.

<sup>50</sup> War Diary, p. 401.

On May 10, she traveled from Tel Aviv to Haifa with Ezra Danin. Sasson was stranded in Jerusalem. In Haifa Ruttenberg's wife provided her with an Arab dress and head scarf. Danin put on a *kolpak* (policeman's hat). The drill was that they were to appear as a married couple. In the Middle East no one intrudes on a wife in the company of her husband. They reached Naharayim at 5 pm and were escorted to the border by Daskal. Waiting for Zbaiti, Golda asked Danin if he were afraid. He replied that he had faced death many times and was not afraid. "But why are you traveling?" he asked her. Her reply became her slogan: "If there is a chance, even the slightest one, to save the life of one Jewish lad—I am going".<sup>51</sup> Zbaiti finally arrived and drove them to Amman, a two-hour journey through many military checkpoints. En route they saw Jordanian troops moving westward. The king appeared. "He met us in friendship", she reported two days later to members of the People's Council—"but it was a different man, very troubled, nervous and bothered". Even before they reached Amman, Zbaiti informed them of the king's proposal:

A unified country, with autonomy for Jews in those areas mostly populated by them, i. e. Tel Aviv. This arrangement will be valid for a year. After a year the country will be annexed to Jordan. In the conversation with this man he mentioned something about a fifty-fifty parliament, maybe even a fifty-fifty government. Later he said of the government: Maybe, we shall see. Abdullah opened by asking if his plan was given to the Jews. Golda confirmed this but added there was no way they will accept it, although they thought it important to meet with him. Abdullah spoke of his desire for peace, not destruction—he pitied farms and industry. The only way to avoid war was to accept his plan. Besides, what's our rush?

In her reply Golda said the Jews waited for two thousand years and no one could blame them of any rush. She now accused him of renegeing on the promises he gave in November. Her report to the People's Council continued:

We had a word. We relied on that word. We trusted this friendship because for years we have had mutual understanding and friendly ties with him. We also saw—I told him—this friendship based on another factor: common enemies. In the past five months we have done something useful to him as well: we have succeeded in hitting these enemies. The Mufti's strength in the country has been reduced thanks to our military achievements...We added that in contrast to his plan we suggest that he returns to the plan that has always existed over which there was mutual understanding and an agreement. He did not deny that was his wish, but over time things happened in the land. There was the matter of Deir Yassin. Then I was one, now I am one among five and I cannot. I have no choice and I cannot otherwise.

We told him we knew there are five, but we have always seen you as one standing against all the rest. We hinted that we also think there are not only five but England has done its utmost

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<sup>51</sup> Ezra Danin, *A Zionist under all Conditions*, Tel Aviv, 1986, pp. 191–198.

to safeguard its position even if he loses. Now we have to take into account that partition is a fact and England would be happy if it fails. Even if not—nothing will happen to England. I also told him that our force now does not resemble what it was 3–5 months ago or even a month ago. If it will be war, we shall fight with all our might. He said, naturally you have to repel an attack...

At a certain moment the king realized that the die was cast and the Jews were determined to reject his proposal. He tried a delaying tactic saying he heard that Sharett was in France and perhaps he should meet with him. Golda understood he wanted to gain time; maybe with Sharett he would find a common language as they were old friends and spoke in Arabic and could even reach an agreement. But she did not fall into the trap:

I told him that Shertok (Sharett) would be in France for a very short time, and would certainly be very happy to meet him. But on this matter there will certainly be no change. We then told him we were ready to respect borders as long as there is peace. But in case of war—we shall fight everywhere with what force we shall have. He repeated his warning, but not in a threatening manner. The entire conversation was conducted with friendship, and on his part from fatigue and depression. He was very sorry, he said, but he had no choice. He wants us to reflect and if the answer is positive it must be given before May 15. He will invite his Palestinians and the moderate Arabs, from us he wants the moderates and then the entire matter can be resolved. He also said there should be no fear that in the government there will be extremist Jew hating Arabs, only moderate Arabs. We said we did not want to delude him and even a discussion on this proposal is unacceptable. Not only will no responsible institution agree to it, but there will not be even ten Jews ready to support this plan, and our reply is immediate—it's out of the question. If he reneges on the agreement we had with him and if he wants war—then we shall meet after the war...<sup>52</sup>

She noted that the king complained that Danin “did not help him, this time”. As they parted, Abdullah’s last words were: “I am very sorry and it’s too bad about the blood and destruction everywhere”. Golda’s words contained some bravado. But there was nothing to lose. The attempt to persuade the king failed and as anticipated he decided to go to war. The Hagannah had to immediately revise its strategy. She was determined to return to Tel Aviv at once to report to Ben-Gurion. Her feeling towards Abdullah was “that he proceeded to this not happily and secured, but as a man in a vise, who cannot escape from it”. She now realized that her report could change the outcome of the first few days of the expected war, hence the sense of urgency to get out of Amman. But Oriental customs were binding

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<sup>52</sup> On the Abdullah-Meir conversation see protocols of the People’s Executive, meeting of 12 May 1948, pp. 40–43; Danin, *Zionist*; Yoav Galbar, *Independence versus Nakbah*, Israel, the Palestinians and the Arab States, 1948, Or Yehuda, 2004; Avi Shlaim, *Collusion Across the Jordan*, King Abdullah, the Zionist Movement, and the Partition of Palestine, Oxford, 1988.

and she had to endure dinner in Zbaiti's home so as not to insult him. They knew they would require his services in the future. She barely tasted the food. Zbaiti drove them back to Naharayim and left them in an open field, from where they walked until a Hagannah agent helped them cross the border. In the early hours of the morning of May 11 Golda and Danin reflected on what happened in Amman and the price the war would exact. Danin estimated the Yishuv's casualties could reach tens of thousands. She was shocked but did not respond. From Naharayim they drove directly to Tel Aviv and she entered the hall where the Mapai Central Committee was meeting to hear Ben-Gurion's report of the security situation and to support the declaration of independence due to take place in three days' time.

Not wanting to cause special attention to herself, she sent Ben-Gurion a note: "We met in friendship. He is awfully worried and looks terrible. Did not deny that we had a word and understanding on a desirable arrangement, meaning he will take the Arab part. But now he is one of five and this is the plan he proposed—a unified country with autonomy in the Jewish parts, a year later this unified country will be under his rule". Ben-Gurion understood at once the significance of this message and rushed to the Hagannah headquarters, summoning Yadin, Galili and Rattner, and demanded "to transform all our forces to mobile ones, hasten the conquest of the road to Jerusalem and the Arab islands in the settlements and plan a campaign against a comprehensive Arab invasion".<sup>53</sup>

That evening Ben-Gurion held another crucial meeting at his home with Golda, Eshkol, Galili and the Hagannah top commanders to prepare for the possibility of an Arab invasion, or rather when it would be launched and how best to prepare for it. The subject of truce in Jerusalem aimed at releasing forces from that city was also discussed. Golda asked if "it was desirable for us to fight in Jerusalem in front of the Christian world in opposition to Christianity?" The discussion was inconclusive.<sup>54</sup> Later that evening Ben-Gurion cabled Eban in New York: "Top secret. In course secret conversation Meyerson and Meir (code name for Abdullah) last night he made it clear Arab invasion with his forces spearhead will begin on termination mandate. Invasion expected Friday or Saturday".<sup>55</sup>

Wednesday, May 12, was the day of decision. That afternoon the People's Executive met in the Jewish National Fund building in north Tel Aviv. Among the members of the 13 were Ben-Gurion, Bernstein, Zisling, Kaplan, Rosenblitt, Remez, Shitreet, Sharett and Shapira. Golda Meyerson, David Horowitz and Zeev Sherf were also invited. When Golda reported on her talk with Abdullah, Danin

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<sup>53</sup> War Diary, p. 409.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 410.

<sup>55</sup> Political Documents, p. 778.

and Sasson were also present. Following her report, Sharett reported on the situation in the United Nations and on his talks with Secretary of State George C. Marshall. Acting Hagannah Chief of Staff Yadin provided a very sober assessment. After surveying the balance of forces, he thought the Arabs had a numerical edge, but added:

there can be no pure military consideration of weapon against weapon and unit against unit. We lack these arms and these armored cars. The consideration is to what extent our people will overcome this force, with our morale and capability, with our plan and tactics. It has been proven that in certain cases not the formation and numbers determine...if I want to conclude and be careful, I would say that at this time the chances are fifty-fifty, to be more candid, I would say their advantage is greater.

In the evening session Ben-Gurion stated simply: “We have to get closer to the target and speak to the point. A: I propose that we shall reach a decision on the matter of proclaiming the state. If we decide, the declaration has to be prepared and certain known steps have to be taken. B: We have to decide on other matters connected to defense”. They then discussed Jerusalem and since Golda was due to fly to Jerusalem the next day, she asked for instructions: “I cannot go to Jerusalem without a clear decision on this matter: do we want an armistice...” Then she added:

I want us to discuss if we want an armistice under the assumption that this is a good armistice and not a cease-fire...They are now talking to us about an armistice and not a cease-fire, and if we want an armistice we have to specify under which conditions. I think we should be interested in removing Jerusalem from the burden of war, but not under any terms. I think that if we could and they will agree to our terms, there will be no fighting in Jerusalem, and the pressure on food supply to Jerusalem will be removed—I think this releases forces to other places where the war will go on...

She recommended the acceptance of an armistice only if free access to the Old City of Jerusalem be assured, as well as access to the Jerusalem road and protecting entry points to the city, not status quo ante, but status quo. If they refused these terms, there should be no armistice. She proposed that Atarot and Neve Yaacov north of Jerusalem be included in the area of the armistice. It was decided to try and propose armistice and that Golda would handle it.

The members of the Executive then moved to discuss a UN proposal for an armistice which meant postponing the declaration of the state. The discussion lasted until 2 am. Golda attended the entire meeting, although with no voting rights. She spoke after Remez who asked to delay the proclamation and suggested that the future Jewish government would be the successor of the United Nations Implementation Committee which was appointed by the General Assembly in

December 1947 to implement the partition resolution. The British never let it into the country, but formally it still existed. Golda reacted simply:

I think this will not help us and we must go all the way. We cannot zigzag. Something should have happened on April 1 and it did not. There should have been an Implementation Commission and there was and is none. And we proclaim and are bound to proclaim the establishment of the state. And if we do so, it must be done with all the details. A state among the nations has a government, and our state must have a government. But since there have been no elections, it must be a provisional government. I do not propose to annul this body. I accept Moshe's (Sharett) words only in the esthetic sense: let's call it the 37 or any other name but not instead of a government. It is my opinion that with the proclamation of the state it is inconceivable that we do not turn to the UN for recognition. To make one step and then hesitate will not be useful to us. I think the world awaits it, and if there is a proclamation it has to be done fully.<sup>56</sup>

From faraway New York, Chaim Weizmann was pressing for a decision: “What are these idiots waiting for” he wondered aloud. Ben-Gurion undertook the final effort of convincing his colleagues to go ahead and proclaim independence two days later on Friday. His words reflected the vision, faith, sobriety and cruel realism of an experienced leader. He was prepared to run the risk of proclaiming independence but failed to persuade two of his own colleagues. The final count was six for—Ben-Gurion, Sharett (Mapai), Zisling and Bentov (Mapam), Shapira (Mizrachi) and Bernstein (General Zionists). Four were against: Kaplan and Remez (Mapai), Rosenblitt (The Progressives) and Shitreet (Sephardy Party). Three members of the 13 were stranded in Jerusalem and did not vote. Golda, not being a member of the 13, also did not vote. But her words may have persuaded some of those who supported independence. This was one of the most crucial votes in the history of the Yishuv. At this critical moment she followed Ben-Gurion. Remez did not even achieve a delay. It is not clear whether she and Remez even had time to discuss this. She came back from Amman in the morning hours of May 11, reported the results and attended the Mapai Central Committee meeting. Their views were contradictory. Golda was resolute. She did not dwell on philosophic, historic or legal issues. She simply wanted a decision. There were no half steps, she said. Remez was sincerely terrified over the ability of the Yishuv to survive an Arab attack that would result in huge number of casualties.

What role did Golda play at this critical juncture? In fact, since the beginning of the war, her roles in Palestine were marginal, apart from the fundraising trip to America which she dominated. Her roles in Jerusalem in December and early January, and later in March, April and early May were not central and she resented

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<sup>56</sup> Protocols of the People's Executive, 12 May 1948, pp. 80–110.

this. In the last month prior to independence it seems that she was pushed aside, since she was not even included in the provisional government. While she was still the senior Jewish official in charge of Jerusalem, maintaining contact with foreign consuls and British officials, she knew that Sharett would be the foreign minister and that the staff of the Political Department would serve under him. Although she never spoke of this publicly, she must have worried about what was her immediate future. Formally she belonged to the People's Council, but that was a parliamentary and not an executive body. Her powers lay in running things and not sitting on the sidelines giving advice. No wonder Ben-Gurion noted that she felt deprived, but he could not be of much help. He was too busy with defense and did not wish to enter into arguments with the Mapai leadership that clearly preferred Remez to Golda. Her major contribution was raising funds to cover the war expenses. In the future Ben-Gurion would say of her: "When history will be written, it will be said that it was a Jewish woman who obtained the funds that made the state possible". This was said years later, when she needed support and expressions of appreciation for what she had done. But in those days she hardly won any praise, which sorely disappointed her. But she tried to forget these slights and focus on the mission ahead: to return to Jerusalem and try and arrange a cease-fire through those elements that were still around and had some influence—the foreign consuls, the UN and the Red Cross. From early morning, May 14, the High Commissioner would no longer be in charge. The mandate would expire on Friday at midnight.

On Thursday, May 13, she found herself sitting dejected and gloomy next to the pilot in a small "Piper Cub" plane that had just brought the Jerusalem Haganah commander David Shealtiel and Rabbi Maimon who came to Tel Aviv for the ceremony of the declaration of independence. Golda took off from a small airstrip in north Tel Aviv. She was miserable, as she was about to miss the greatest historic event of the Jewish people in modern times. A few minutes out of Tel Aviv, the pilot noticed the engine was malfunctioning. Instead of making an emergency landing in Jerusalem, he decided to return to Tel Aviv. Golda never regretted his decision. She had grave doubts about the cease-fire in Jerusalem, and if she was destined not to be in a plane accident, then why not attend the ceremony. She was among the 200 lucky ones invited to attend the ceremony due to take place at the Tel Aviv Museum on Friday, May 14, at 4 pm. As a member of the People's Council, she was entitled to sign the declaration of independence. As a product of the American school system, she knew well that her signature on this historic document would forever enshrine her name in the annals of the Jewish people. Back in Tel Aviv, she went at once to Ben-Gurion, who noted in his diary: "The plane flew again to Jerusalem and took Golda. But she returned



from Bab el Wad because of engine problem”.<sup>57</sup> She managed to take part in the discussions on the final formulation of the declaration of independence, some of it devoted to matters verging on religion—how to address God in the document: as the Rock of Israel, the Good Lord or another name to satisfy both the left-wing quasi-atheistic Mapam and the orthodox Mizrachi party. They finally settled on the Rock of Israel.

All that morning news poured into the Hagannah headquarters describing the Arab preparations for invasion. The previous evening, Sharett had cabled his people in New York: “demand an immediate, strongest effort secure immediate, direct, sternest warning by President personally to King in view his desisting from impending invasion and onslaught on Jewish population Palestine by Arab Legion and Iraqi troops, now jointly under his command. Cables should be addressed to Amman direct. Hours count”.<sup>58</sup> Golda was among the few leaders in the country who realized how fragile the military situation was. But she was infected with Ben-Gurion’s unshakable faith that the Yishuv would overcome and hold out against the Arabs.

Friday, May 14, was a pleasant spring day. In Jerusalem, the “Union Jack” was lowered from its mast at Government House. General Cunningham reviewed a guard of honor, bugles sounded, Scottish bagpipers played. The High Commissioner then drove through Jerusalem, flew from Atarot to Haifa and boarded the British warship “Eurylus”. She sailed at midnight. That morning the British Parliament adopted an act terminating the Mandate. The defenders of the Ezion Bloc surrendered to the Arab Legion, scores were massacred, many taken prisoners and driven to Jordan. The Hagannah captured Acre, Jaffa surrendered to the Jews. Although the event was supposed to be secret, hundreds of Tel Avivians gathered near the Museum, sensing something historic was about to unfold.

Golda went back to her room at the “Katie Dan” hotel on Hayarkon Street. She washed her hair, put on a black dress and waited for the car that would take her to the Museum. She arrived early and took her seat in the front row next to the dais. At 4 pm Ben-Gurion rose and in his metallic, clear voice read the Declaration of Independence. She then broke into tears. All the tensions of the recent months erupted. She described the ceremony in very moving words:

All I recall about my actual signing of the proclamation is that I was crying openly, not able even to wipe the tears from my face, and I remember that as Sharett held the scroll in place for me, a man called David Zvi Pincus, who belonged to the religious Mizrachi Party, came over to try and calm me. ‘Why do you weep so much Golda?’, he asked me. ‘Because it

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<sup>57</sup> War Diary, p. 414; Sherf, *Three Days*, pp. 174–175.

<sup>58</sup> Political Documents, p. 791.

breaks my heart to think of all those who should have been here today and are not', I replied but I still could not stop crying.<sup>59</sup>

She then signed with an assured hand "Golda Meyerson" and by this act entered the national memory of the Jewish people.

The ceremony concluded with the singing of Hatikvah, accompanied by the Philharmonic Orchestra which was seated on the second floor of the museum. The public refused to disperse as though they wanted the moment to linger. On that day Golda signed another document, a cable sent jointly by Ben-Gurion, Sharett, Kaplan, Remez and herself to Chaim Weizmann in New York. "On the occasion of the establishment of the Jewish State we send our greetings to you who have done more than any man towards its creation. Your help and stand have strengthened all of us. We look forward to the day when we shall see you at the head of the State established in peace".<sup>60</sup> This time Weizmann broke into bitter tears at the "Waldorf Astoria" hotel in New York. The struggle between the activists and the moderates was over. The former won. The museum began to empty slowly. Ben-Gurion rushed to the Hagannah headquarters and from there to his home. The leaders had no time to celebrate.

Golda decided to add a feminine touch to the events of the day. She approached Mapai's Secretary General Zeev On and said: "Zeev, let's bring flowers to Ben-Gurion and let's take Shazar with us". The three bought a large bouquet in a flower shop on Allenby Street and drove to Ben-Gurion's house. Paula Ben-Gurion greeted them with excitement "He is upstairs, he is sitting with the General Command". She called him but he refused to come down. "Don't bother me", he said sternly, I am busy". Finally he descended the narrow staircase from the second floor. At the foot of the steps he saw his three colleagues. Golda handed him the bouquet. He faced them, embarrassed, pale and subdued. Then he said quietly: "You will forgive me, I must go back. I am sitting with the General Command because the Arab attack has already begun".<sup>61</sup> The three left his home in silence. They knew that the fate of Israel was not only in the hands of the young men and women who now faced the full brunt of the Arab invasion, but also in the hands of this little and energetic man who brought about the great miracle by his ability to reach brave decisions and convince others to follow him.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Meir, *My Life*, p. 167.

<sup>60</sup> Chaim Weizmann, *Trial and Error*, Tel Aviv, 1948, p. 461.

<sup>61</sup> Bar-Zohar, *Ben-Gurion*, Vol. II, p. 753.

<sup>62</sup> *War Diary*, p. 461.

They calmed down somewhat. Golda went back to her hotel. That night she was alone once again. Sarah was in besieged Revivim, Menachem was in New York, her sister and brother-in-law in Holon. Some tried to drag her to a modest party in the hotel. But her mind was not on partying. The great day was over. She would be awakened that night and told that Truman had recognized Israel. All the plans for a trusteeship were now history. The Special Assembly of the United Nations dispersed in disarray when word came of Truman's recognition of Israel. In scores of cities all over the world Jews danced in the streets. That midnight large Arab forces crossed the borders. The second phase of the War of Independence began. Golda hardly slept that night. She was unable to digest the flow of events. With the rest of the Yishuv she wondered what was in store for the country and its people and what would be her own role in the future.

## 9 Interlude in Moscow (1948–1949)

Saturday, May 15, dawned sunny and warm. The tremendous excitement of the previous day was still in the air, and so were Egyptian fighter planes that dropped a few bombs on an airstrip in northern Tel Aviv. Israel was barely twenty hours old, but it was a political reality, already recognized by the United States. But the nascent state was also at war and mobilization was in full swing. From her hotel room, Golda watched the first ships carrying arms and immigrants sail towards the Tel Aviv harbor, not stopped by the British navy. Both arms and soldiers were desperately needed as the neighboring Arab states made good their threat and invaded Israel at midnight. Golda sat on the balcony reliving the dramatic events of the past week and pondering her own future.

It seemed that every one in Israel knew what he had to do but Golda. Suddenly it dawned on her that she had neither a real job nor any administrative responsibility, for the first time since 1928. In fact she had no office to go to. In the past month she had not given it much thought. There were many other pressing things to do and to plan. But now she realized that there had been a major shift in the old institutional setup. The Political Department of the Jewish Agency had overnight become the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Provisional Government of (as some cynics said) the “Provisional” State of Israel. Her job in Jerusalem lapsed as her functions there would be taken over by Dr. Dov Yossef, the newly appointed Military Governor of Jerusalem on behalf of Israel, as the city was not yet part of the territory of Israel. Golda was not included in the Provisional Government and apparently no one had the time or interest to consider what position or responsibility to offer her. Perhaps it was assumed that she would be the person in charge in Jerusalem. But that did not materialize. So, on that morning, feeling the aftereffects of Independence Day, she sat there considering the future of Israel and pondering her own role in the new state. She was among the very few who knew how precarious the whole thing was, how fragile it was and how much its existence depended on the few thousands young men and women who were fighting for the survival of the Jewish State. But she did not have to wait long before she found out what her next move would be. Cables arrived during the night from the United Jewish Appeal: she must return at once to America and continue the fundraising she started in February. Now that she was a signatory of Israel’s Declaration of Independence, she would be even more effective. Henry Montor claimed that if she came back at once they could raise at least an additional fifty million dollars. He had no doubt that the moment must be seized and as the best professional in the field of fundraising, he was right. American Jews were ecstatic, overwhelmed by Israel’s emergence and by the recognition their President had granted it. They were ready to open their hearts and purses to save

Israel and to ensure the dream of Jewish nationhood. They, of course, preferred that Ben-Gurion come, but realized this was totally out of the question. The next best candidate was Golda. Of all of Israel's new leaders, she was also the only one available to undertake this mission.

The next morning, on May 16, she participated in a meeting in the Kirya office of Prime Minister and Defense Minister Ben-Gurion. Others present were Sharett and Kaplan (who became finance minister). Sharett sought Ben-Gurion's approval to travel urgently to New York to meet the Soviet UN representative Andrei Gromyko to request Soviet military aid to Israel, and then travel to Washington to discuss with members of the Truman administration the grave consequences of the Arab invasion on regional and world peace. Ben-Gurion rejected Sharett's idea and approved instead Golda's trip to America to raise funds. Her trip was part of his immediate strategy. Israel needed precious time to absorb the weapons and men now freely flowing to her shores mainly from Eastern Europe. The Israeli army must hold on for at least two weeks before some sort of a cease-fire could be arranged. Golda would raise the money for arms, food and the initial costs of running the state. Ben-Gurion noted in his diary that "she was ready to go".<sup>1</sup> On that day Ben-Gurion advised the Provisional Government that

so far we have entered into arms contracts in Europe for 19 million dollars, of which 15 million were paid. We started these purchases after the meeting of the Zionist Executive in Paris in August 1946. But we shall require far greater sums and there is need that Golda Meyerson will go to America at once for this purpose. Our action in this sphere before the proclamation of the state was successful. With the means obtained by Golda, we bought rifles, light and heavy machine guns, artillery pieces are on their way. Now we need planes and tanks. We are able to hold out until we get these weapons.<sup>2</sup>

Furthermore, and this he may not have thought of, the trip would give her something significant to do, would take her mind off her anxiety for the safety of her daughter in kibbutz Revivim, not far from the route taken by the invading Egyptian forces. It would also give Mapai's leaders time to seriously ponder what position she should eventually be offered.

The trip was hastily organized. There were many technical problems to be resolved. She left most of her clothing in besieged Jerusalem and there was no way to get them to Tel Aviv. She would travel light and buy clothing in New York. There was need for a new Israeli passport. The Foreign Ministry provided her with a diplomatic *laissez-passer* number 1, personally signed by Sharett, among the first such official documents issued at the time. But to be on the safe side,

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<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 431.

<sup>2</sup> Ben-Gurion, *The State of Israel Renewed*, Vol. I, p. 109.

she would also keep her Palestinian passport on which she had an American visa. The next problem was how to get her out of the country. Since the end of the British mandate, all international airlines had ceased flying to the country and the only international airport at Lod was occupied by the Jordanian Arab Legion. There was a small airstrip in north Tel Aviv which was bombed by the Egyptians, and another more secure airstrip in Haifa bay.

While waiting for travel arrangements to be made, Sharett came to see her on May 17 with an interesting and original proposal. The Soviet Union had just recognized Israel, being the third nation to do so after the U.S.A and Guatemala. He needed an ambassador to Moscow and he came to sound her out if she would be interested in going there as Israel's first envoy to the Soviet Union, then considered a very strong supporter of Israel, the power which the left-wing Mapam party even thought of as Israel's foremost friend and ally since, unlike the United States, the Soviet leaders did not impose an arms embargo on Israel and approved the continuation of the various arms deals entered into with the Czech government long before the Communist takeover of that country in February 1948. Her initial reaction was great reluctance. She wondered if the idea had the blessing of Ben-Gurion and was not aimed at removing her out of the country to a marginal post. She knew little about the Soviet Union but enough to realize that Moscow would be very far from where key decisions affecting the future of Israel would be made. She argued that she spoke no Russian or even French, the language of diplomacy. Sharett answered that there were interpreters for that. She told him that by nature she was outspoken, of which Sharett was fully aware, she said she was not suited for diplomatic niceties. Sharett did not ask for an immediate reply and left the matter pending until her return from America.

The idea to send her to Moscow was, in retrospect, a poor one. She would have been far more effective in America, a country she knew well, whose language she spoke and where she was already becoming a well-known entity among Jews and non-Jews alike. In America, a democratic country with free press, she could do wonders in public relations. In a totalitarian regime like the Soviet Union, she would have no access to the media, let alone to the Jewish community. Why was she never even considered as ambassador to the United States? Formally, there already was an envoy in Washington—Eliyahu Eilat, a close friend and colleague of Sharett's from Jewish Agency days. Eilat had been the Jewish Agency representative in Washington since 1945 and did a very good job. A modest scholarly man, with much charm and dignity, Eilat was noted for his ability to make friends. He was not considered an orator able to move people by words, he spoke good English with a heavy Russian accent, but he did not awe people with his fluent English or intellectual brilliance as his successor Abba Eban would do later on. Eilat was a highly competent and reliable diplomat and Sharett, always loyal

to his men, saw no reason to remove him from Washington, especially in view of the key role he played in securing Truman's immediate recognition of Israel. This would be an act of betrayal of the highest order which Sharett would never commit.

Obviously Golda would have been ideal for Washington. But there were fears—was it proper to send an ex-American to Washington? The fact that she was born in Czarist Russia did not bother Sharett when he offered her Moscow, most of Israel's leaders, including himself, were born there. Having a major Israeli leader such as Golda in Washington would signal to the American government that she was not an ordinary diplomat, but a member of the Israeli ruling elite, and this would give her greater weight. She would speak there with far more authority than Eilat. The fact that she had the ear of Ben-Gurion may have also worried Sharett. Besides, she was even then a political rival. Her standing in the party's hierarchy was almost equal to his. She had replaced him in 1946 as head of the Political Department and her "activist" views were known to him. He knew that she was a devout and loyal follower of Ben-Gurion and may have feared that she would by-pass him and deal directly with the prime minister. Sharett never had much regard for Golda's intellect, her limited command of Hebrew and English. He knew she was at her best in Yiddish, alas not the language of diplomacy. Eight years later, when Ben-Gurion replaced Sharett with Golda as foreign minister, his true sentiments about Golda erupted in his diary. They were very far from complimentary.

There is no evidence that anyone even considered the possibility of asking Golda to represent Israel in Washington. She did resent Sharett for making the Moscow offer. But now there was no time for such thoughts. The next day she set off for New York. The ever-resourceful Teddy Kollek, in Tel Aviv to attend the declaration of independence ceremony, heard that a small plane brought to Israel a number of foreign correspondents to cover the war. The plane was about to return empty to Athens. A seat was secured for Kollek, who returned to New York to resume his position of heading the Hagannah arms purchasing mission. Another passenger was Gideon Rafael, a Foreign Ministry senior official. The third was Golda. They boarded the small Beechcraft in Haifa and flew to Athens via Cyprus. Rafael later wrote: "We boarded the aircraft unescorted and silent, each of us deep in his own thoughts on the future, but bound together by the feeling of joint responsibility for the accomplishment of our tasks".<sup>3</sup>

From Athens, Golda flew to New York. Her arrival there was vastly different from the last one in January. This time she was representing the Government of

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<sup>3</sup> Gideon Rafael, *Destination Peace, Three Decades of Israeli Foreign Policy*, New York, 1981, p. 9.

Israel, the first leader to come out of the beleaguered country, a formidable voice speaking with assurance and authority. She settled into “Essex House” on Central Park South, where her suite was soon filled with flowers and scores of excited friends from the old days and reporters seeking interviews. Rumors began to circulate that she was going to Moscow. This fact alone, in the midst of the Cold War, was enough to make her a media celebrity. The idea that the school teacher from Milwaukee would represent Israel in Stalin’s Russia sparked the imagination of many. But for the time being, her main and urgent task was to raise funds and instill in American Jewry the strong feeling that Israel would hold out.

The news from Israel was fundamentally bad. The Egyptian invading column advanced towards Tel Aviv. Golda followed their progress with enormous trepidation. But they decided to by-pass her daughter’s kibbutz Revivim and it was spared unlike others on the path of the Egyptian army. The Jordanian Legion was closing in on the Jewish Quarter in the Old City of Jerusalem and shelling the hungry, thirsty and besieged Jewish sections of West Jerusalem. The Syrian army was barely stopped at the gates of Degania, the kibbutz where she made her political debut in 1923. There was not much to be cheerful about. But Golda exuded confidence and self-assurance which rubbed off on others. To her old friend Marie Syrkin she kept repeating: “We have a state, imagine, we have a state”.<sup>4</sup>

For the next six weeks, as Israel fought for its very existence, she would be involved with hectic and intensive fundraising interspersed with some diplomacy. On June 6, Kollek reported to Ben-Gurion that Golda was hoping to obtain 35 million dollars on the present trip. In fact, the exhausting tour netted much more—closer to 50 million dollars.<sup>5</sup> She also engaged in public relations. In each city she visited, she gave radio and press interviews and also appeared on the new media—television. Very quickly she learned how to master this instrument by her dignified appearance, simple English and short answers. She met local dignitaries and Jewish communal leaders and addressed as many meetings as she could squeeze into an impossible schedule. Her message was simple and convincing: After two thousand years the Jews regained their sovereignty and have their own state. Israel must not be allowed to be destroyed for lack of means. Young men and women of Israel were dying to ensure the state’s survival. American Jews must shoulder their share of the burden for keeping the Jewish dream alive. As always, speaking without notes, in plain English, she was able to convey the simple, humane and sincere message to American Jews and they responded. The contributions began to flow.

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<sup>4</sup> Syrkin, *Woman with a Cause*, p.210.

<sup>5</sup> *Political Documents*, Vol. I, p. 316.



In New York, she met regularly with the Israel Delegation to the United Nations. This group was now headed by the rising young star Abba Eban, who, at 33, began to make his own mark for his superb oratory and diplomatic skills. On the agenda was a proposed truce to stop the fighting. Israel needed the truce like oxygen, but was not happy with some of the conditions attached, such as preventing men of military age from landing in Israel and an imposition of an arms embargo. Eban sought Sharett's approval to introduce Golda to Gromyko in view of her impending appointment to Moscow. Sharett authorized the meeting and Eban was able to write to Chaim Weizmann that he "introduced her to Gromyko and they appear to get on well. In our relations with that part of the world all is harmonious and serene".<sup>6</sup>

This rosy assessment was somewhat exaggerated and premature. On June 9 Sharett cabled Eilat in Washington, instructing him to approach the Soviet Embassy in the American capital to help facilitate a visit to Moscow by an Israeli arms purchasing mission. But this move yielded no response.<sup>7</sup> The weapons from Czechoslovakia continued to flow, oil came from Romania, and Yugoslavia granted landing right to airplanes laden with the Czech arms. All this was paid for by the dollars Golda raised in the United States. Above all it was imperative to keep the gates of Eastern Europe apart from the Soviet Union open for Jewish emigration. The Soviet satellites were the major source of immigration to Israel at the time.

The first truce was proclaimed on June 11 and Sharett could finalize Israel's first diplomatic appointments. On June 25 he informed Golda that she would go to Moscow as minister plenipotentiary and that the Russians gave their agreement to her appointment as Israel's first envoy. She joked that she could barely pronounce this title. Sharett's cable agitated her. A major decision affecting her life and career was made without her full consent. She could no longer put off her consent and her appointment was made public on July 7, 1948. Marie Syrkin noted her reaction to this appointment, which was far from enthusiastic. "I remember that all present when she made this disclosure (that she was going to Moscow), myself included, shrieked 'how wonderful'. Strangely enough, she was not pleased at the offer. She could not be indifferent to the honor paid her, nor could her imagination...remain unstirred at the notion of a diplomatic post in Soviet Russia, but her reaction was negative. She said: 'At last we have a state. I want to be there. I don't want to go thousands of miles away'. Then she added: 'Why do I always have to go away?'"<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 384.

<sup>7</sup> Syrkin, *Woman with a Cause*, p. 211.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

She could not turn to Ben-Gurion to rescue her from this mission. He was involved in a number of major crises.<sup>9</sup> The first had to do with the SS *Altalena*, a ship laden with weapons and immigrants organized by the Irgun. Ben-Gurion feared the weapons would be used by the Irgun to mount a military putsch or at least be used by the Irgun forces in Jerusalem, then a separate military entity. There were negotiations about the handing over of the weapons to the government, but they failed and the ship sailed to Tel Aviv and ran aground on the Tel Aviv beach. Ben-Gurion issued an order to the Palmach to sink the vessel. That operation was commanded by Yitzhak Rabin who had been hastily recalled from his honeymoon. The ship burned, men were killed and weapons lost. The Irgun finally disbanded. There would be no separate armed militias in Israel, ruled Ben-Gurion. He was also involved with a mutiny by some of his generals over the appointments of senior officers in the newly created Israel Defense Forces. This led to the firing of Yisrael Galili, the deputy defense minister and former head of the Hagannah. As minister of defense, Ben-Gurion had to prepare the country for the resumption of the war at the end of the thirty-day truce, all this while establishing the country's governmental institutions. Golda could not burden him with her personal problems.

On the eve of her return to Israel, once again with major fundraising achievements to her credit, she was involved in a car accident. A cab in which she was riding in Brooklyn to visit friends collided with another car. Golda was thrown from her seat and a ligament in her right leg was torn and the bone fractured. She was rushed to the New York Hospital for Joint Diseases where her leg was put in a cast. For the time being, her return to Israel was put off. But the diplomatic implications were serious. The Soviet Government apparently refused to believe that she was in hospital and could not travel. They wanted an Israeli envoy in Moscow as soon as possible, fearing that her delayed arrival could mean the delayed departure of their own minister to Tel Aviv, thus giving seniority to the American minister, James McDonald, as dean of the diplomatic corps. These fears were echoed by Mapam's daily newspaper "Al Hamsihmar" claiming that the Government of Israel was delaying the dispatch of an envoy to Russia as it wished to pursue a pro-American line.<sup>10</sup> Sharett was alarmed and flooded Golda with cables wishing her speedy recovery, carefully asking when she could return. Her doctors advised her to get extended rest, while Sharett wanted her in Moscow as soon as possible. Once again she was torn between duty and her health, and

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<sup>9</sup> Official Gazette, 18. Other appointments published were those of Abba Eban to the United Nations, Eliyahu Eilat to Washington and Ehud Avriel to Prague.

<sup>10</sup> See Arthur Koestler, *Promise and Fulfillment*, New York, 1949; Syrkin, *Woman with a Cause*, p. 212.

when she finally decided to return, it was a decision for which she would pay dearly in later years when her leg consistently ached and was swollen. As Sharett pressed her to return, she suggested that he find someone else for that post. He strongly rejected the idea. Politically it would look bad.

Flying to Israel via Paris, she found herself sitting next to Moshe Medzini, Regina's husband, who covered the UN for Israel Radio and "Ha'aretz" daily newspaper. He was asked to carry a diplomatic pouch to Tel Aviv. The new state could not yet afford diplomatic couriers and used any reliable traveller to carry the diplomatic mail. He later recalled that enroute she became curious what was in the bag. They opened it and discovered that in addition to official documents there were also some pairs of nylon stockings for the wife of an Israeli senior diplomat. This caused her to make some snide remarks on Israeli diplomats using official diplomatic mail to smuggle highly prized nylon hose.

Her return to Israel, on July 29, was noted briefly by Ben-Gurion in his diary: "Golda arrived. Collected over \$50 million, we will get 66 % out of \$45 million".<sup>11</sup> He was among the few who appreciated what she did in terms of fundraising and the magnitude of her achievement in America. Since January 1948, she had been instrumental in raising some 90 million dollars, an unheard-of sum. Had she stayed, she could have easily exceeded the 100 million mark. The money was well spent. Israel was a different country from the one she had left ten weeks earlier. In a brief ten-day campaign, the IDF had captured Lod and Ramle, occupied Nazareth, stemmed the Egyptian invasion and opened a new road to relieve Jerusalem. The country was now more self-assured and the sense of immediate doom was lifted, replaced by a growing sense of confidence.

Even prior to her return to Israel, the Foreign Ministry began to assemble the staff for the Israel legation in Moscow. In an act Golda considered highly generous and caring, Sharett proposed that her daughter Sarah and future son in law Zecharia Rechavi, released from military service for medical reasons, travel with her to Moscow and serve as radio operator, a job Sarah did in the kibbutz. She readily gave her consent from her sick bed in New York. This would give her a chance to be with her daughter. Sharett thought this would help Golda relieve the loneliness that she would experience in Moscow. He was right. In later years, this could have been viewed as something verging on nepotism. In the future, members of Golda's family would sometime accompany her, at state expense, on her official travels abroad. Yet in 1948, this was not seen as something unusual. Israel did not yet possess a civil service code which forbade members of the same family to serve in the same office. Being in Moscow with her daughter would lend

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<sup>11</sup> War Diary, p. 625.

the mission a more family-like atmosphere. Others in the legation were Aryeh Levavi, who served for years in the Political Department of the Jewish Agency and would later rise to become Director General of the Foreign Ministry. There was Eiga Shapira who spoke Russian, English and French, a close friend who worked with Regina in the Political Department of the Jewish Agency, who would look after the administrative side. Lou Kadar, a vivacious French-born official, who immigrated to Palestine in the 1930's, was appointed interpreter and social secretary. Lou and Golda would be together for the rest of Golda's life, Lou becoming her confidant, private secretary as well as appointments and social secretary and general factotum. She accompanied Golda on many of her trips abroad as foreign minister and prime minister and shared with her great and dramatic events as well as times of anxiety and despair.

Golda's deputy would be Mordechai Namir, a veteran Mapai politician, who had already negotiated the purchase of oil from Romania. As military attache, the IDF detached General Yochanan Rattner, former commander of the Haganah, an engineer and a highly respected and well-known public figure. He had a falling-out with Ben-Gurion and it was thought that Rattner's being posted to Moscow would be good for both of them. The economic councilor was Moshe Bejarano, scion of a well-known family who pioneered modern industry in the Yishuv. There was also support staff, so there were altogether twenty Israelis, including children. The large staff reflected the hope they would have much to do. When this did not happen, the size of the staff was reduced.

In those days, the Foreign Ministry did not yet have country files and designated diplomats could not prepare themselves properly and systematically. There was hardly any up-to-date information on the Soviet Union. Golda could read of meetings with Soviet diplomats in the United Nations and Eastern European capitals, where massive effort was undertaken to insure steady supply of weapons, training of certain military units and immigration. An important source was Eban, who often met with Gromyko to coordinate Israeli-Soviet positions in the Security Council.<sup>12</sup> But Golda was not much of a reader. She preferred to glean her information by talking to people. The problem was that no one had been to the Soviet Union for at least twenty-five years. From Prague, where he was the first Israeli envoy to present his credentials, Ehud Avriel cabled that the Soviets were becoming restive, asking that Golda come early. Sharett showed this cable to Golda when she made a last-ditch attempt to persuade him to find someone else for Moscow. He insisted, saying they could not endanger the very delicate relationship between Israel and the countries of the Soviet bloc merely because Golda wanted to remain in Israel.

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<sup>12</sup> Eban, *Autobiography*, pp. 119–128.

On the eve of her departure to Moscow, her daughter Sarah was married in Sheina's home in Holon. The wedding was modest and only family and close friends were invited. Regina came from besieged Jerusalem. Now that the couple was duly married, they could travel to Moscow with a rabbinical blessing.

The last days, in the hot and muggy Tel Aviv summer, were devoted to final preparations, farewell parties, and organizing a wardrobe. Eiga insisted that Golda must have a fur coat. This item was bought in New York. The rest of the wardrobe consisted of "Israeli" style dresses. In the last four weeks in Israel, Golda crammed visits to army bases and long sessions with the Mapai leadership. There were meetings with the Soviet Envoy Pavel Yershov and the American Minister James McDonald, whom she had first met in the 1938 Evian conference.<sup>13</sup> There was even time for the theater, concerts and various official and semi-official events. Among the official events was a meeting of the Zionist General Council in August 1948. At the top of the agenda was the issue of what would be the standing of the World Zionist Organization and the Jewish Agency in the new state. How would the Government of Israel work with the American Zionist leadership, who would finance the immigration and absorption of the expected hundreds of thousands of destitute Jews who would stream into Israel? A rift developed between Ben-Gurion and the veteran American Zionist leader Rabbi Abba Hillel Silver, and their relations were strained at best. While Ben-Gurion called on American Jews to immigrate en masse to Israel, Silver felt that Israel would have to depend on Diaspora Jewry for decades. Golda thought the time had come to establish a new body in America to be called "Friends of Israel" to bypass the Zionist Organization of America, Silver's power base that was identified with the centrist Israeli party called the General Zionists. The idea was impractical but demonstrated that a growing gap was emerging between Israel and the Diaspora, mainly the American Diaspora.<sup>14</sup>

On August 18, Ben-Gurion appeared at one of Golda's farewell parties, a highly unusual gesture on his part and she was moved. He may have heard some of the stories that circulated in Tel Aviv regarding her appointment. One of them appeared in Arthur Koestler's book "Promise and Fulfillment" relating that Golda was named to the Moscow post after Israeli diplomats checked with Russians diplomats in the UN who would be acceptable. The Russians answered: "Send someone from the ruling party that has the full confidence of the prime minister—that is our custom". Koestler then added the following anecdote: "They offered the position to Golda who said: I do not know a word of Russian, I never

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<sup>13</sup> McDonald reported this conversation to the Department of State, FRUS, Vol. V, 1948, p. 1314.

<sup>14</sup> Melvin Urofsky, *We Are One*, New York, 1978, p. 281.

read Pushkin, and know nothing about steel and rain and have completely forgotten what Stalin and Trotsky argued over”.<sup>15</sup> The story was quite amusing but totally baseless. However, there are grounds to assume that Ben-Gurion hinted to Golda that given the first opportunity, he would recall her back from Moscow and appoint her to his cabinet. She never concealed from her family and friends that she had no intention of becoming a career diplomat and that her mission to Moscow would be, at best, very brief.

As the departure time drew near, the level of excitement among those traveling rose. Golda was imbued with great expectations mixed with huge fears. Israel, then in its third month of existence, needed help from any source ready to provide it. The Soviet Union played a key role in the United Nations and influenced directly the adoption of the partition resolution. It quickly recognized Israel and allowed it to acquire weapons in Czechoslovakia. Golda knew the Soviets did all this for purely national and strategic interests, wishing to see the British leave Palestine, as they knew well that a civil war would ensue which the Jews would win. They expected the Jews to turn to them for help and this could enable them to influence the policies of the Israeli government and maybe even its makeup. They also understood that the Arabs would not acquiesce with their defeat and eventually would make their way to the Soviet Union in their quest for military and political help against Israel. At this stage, Golda preferred not to think only in negative terms and hoped that, perhaps because of the Holocaust, the Soviet leaders might have changed their traditionally virulently anti-Zionist policy to one of support for the Jewish state.

Above all, there was an air of uncertainty over the future of Soviet Jewry and their present state. No one knew how many there were, how many retained their Jewishness and what was their attitude to Israel. Also, how should the Israeli diplomats deal with them, not wanting to be accused by the Soviet Government of interfering in the internal affairs of the host country. It was evident that the meeting point would be the Great Synagogue in Moscow and Golda insisted that the men know how to recite the prayers in synagogue. Most of the staff spoke Hebrew, Russian, Yiddish and English. Lou and Eiga also spoke French. The children spoke only Hebrew.

The Mapai party was the last body to host a farewell gathering, where its leaders vied with each other about who would praise her the most. On August 29, the convoy made its way to the Haifa air strip, accompanied by Sharett. He felt that he owed it to her. The traveling party came with scores of pieces of luggage, most of which had to be left behind because of the small size of the Czech Airlines DC-3.

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<sup>15</sup> Koestler, *ibid.*

They flew to Rome where they spent the night. According to tradition a meeting was held with Israeli emissaries in the Italian capital, where Golda explained “the situation.” The next morning they flew to Prague assuming the rest of the journey to Moscow would be by rail. But Israel’s ambassador to Prague Avriel informed them that the Soviet Embassy had advised him that a special plane would be put at their disposal by the Soviet government (at Israel’s expense—124 dollars per passenger). While waiting for the plane to arrive, Golda paid a courtesy call on the Soviet ambassador in Prague, Cillin, for a chilly and very formal 20 minute conversation. She also visited the Israel Legation and the offices of the Joint Distribution Committee as well as some tourist sites in Prague.<sup>16</sup>

The special plane arrived on September 2 and they flew to Moscow via Lvov. The final leg of the journey lasted five hours and Golda sat pondering what had happened since she had left Czarist Russia as an eight-year-old child, escaping pogroms and poverty. Forty-two years later she was returning as Israel’s first diplomatic envoy to that country. Meanwhile a revolution had toppled the Czarist regime and replaced it by a Communist authoritarian dictatorship. The Jewish people, including hundreds of thousands of Russian Jews, had undergone the greatest disaster in their history—the Holocaust. But there was not much time for ruminating. The plane landed at Vnukovo airfield and the party was met by the Chief of Protocol Molochkov. After a brief reception ceremony they proceeded to the city, a journey that lasted for hours as they arrived on the day of Zhdanov’s funeral. Andrei Zhdanov had been one of Stalin’s closest associates, and had died a few days earlier. They finally arrived at the “Metropol” Hotel where they would stay for the first few weeks. After a lavish dinner (at their expense, as they discovered later), they cabled Tel Aviv of their safe arrival, which turned out to be a chore. Since they wrote it in Hebrew in Latin letters, problems arose in transmitting the cable and it was finally sent through the Israel Legation in Prague. The next day Namir and Levavi went to the Soviet Foreign Ministry to discuss many technical details. There was need to open a bank account, to learn foreign currency regulations, and how to send coded cables. The Soviets were kind enough to allow the Israelis to despatch their cables via New York or Tangiers rather than via Cairo, their nearest wireless station to Tel Aviv.

The immediate problem was housing. The hotel was uncomfortable, very expensive and ate up much of the legation’s limited budget. The Russians promised to look into this matter quickly. The Israelis were told that they could fly their flag from the Legation rooftop only on national (Israeli and Soviet) holidays, but

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<sup>16</sup> The chief source for the Golda Meir’s mission in Moscow is Mordechai Namir, *Mission to Moscow*, Tel Aviv, 1976, p. 37 (henceforth referred to as Namir); see also Pinkus, *Special Relations*, pp. 219–319.

it could be attached to the official car. According to protocol, prior to presenting her letter of accreditation to the Soviet president, she met on September 7 in the Kremlin with Foreign Minister Vyacheslav Molotov and handed him a copy. She went alone, assuming he spoke English. He preferred to speak in Russian through an interpreter.<sup>17</sup> She reported to Sharett that following the usual questions about her trip and health, she handed to him a copy of accreditation and thanked the Soviet Union for its support. Molotov responded by saying this was in line with Soviet policy of helping freedom-loving nations. As this was the first high-level meeting with a Soviet leader she discussed at length Israel's desire for peace to be attained through direct negotiations with the Arabs. She argued that if the Arabs had not received aid from the outside, the war would have been over long ago. She mentioned the fact that a number of Arab states were already showing signs of remorse for becoming embroiled in this adventure. But due to internal difficulties, their governments were unable to act freely. The chief culprit was Britain. To this Molotov readily agreed. He stated that Israel was a living fact whose existence could no longer be doubted and promised Soviet aid. At this stage Golda suggested that due to Israel's recent victories on the battlefield, there might be a need to revise the 1947 partition borders. Molotov's response was simple: "Of course problems will arise which we shall have to deal with". She then criticized the plan of UN Mediator Count Folke Bernadotte who proposed giving the Negev and Jerusalem to the Arabs in return for Galilee to the Jews, in total contradiction of the 1947 partition plan. She added that Israel could not abide for much longer with the state of no war-no peace and Molotov agreed with that. The conversation was not on a deep ideological level and she refrained from trying to convince him of the justice of Israel's case. She felt he had a good grasp of the situation and left it at that.<sup>18</sup> The next day the Israelis were informed that housing was found: the building that housed the Indian Embassy headed by Mrs. Lakshmi Pandit (Nehru's sister), would be placed at their disposal. The date for presenting credentials was fixed for September 10. As the Soviet President Nikolai Shvernich was on holiday, the accreditation would be presented to his deputy Vlasov.

Two days before the ceremony there was a hitch. The Israelis were informed that the formulation of the letter was not in line with their custom. In the Soviet Union, the President was not addressed singularly, but since it was a collective body, the letter had to use plural instead of singular. But, said the Chief of Protocol, in view of the circumstances, they would not ask the letter to be re-written in order not to delay the ceremony, the Israelis should leave it as it was.

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<sup>17</sup> Namir, pp. 38–40.

<sup>18</sup> Namir, pp. 41–42; Political Documents, Vol. I, p. 575.



On the day of presenting her credentials, Golda wore a full-length black dress which she had sewn in Tel Aviv. Rattner wore blue IDF ceremonial uniform. The rest of the men donned morning coats, white gloves and top hats. The Russians insisted on full protocol. The convoy made its way from the “Metropol” Hotel to the Kremlin, saluted by sentries along the way. Golda faced Vlasov, who was accompanied by Valerian Zorin, Molotov’s deputy and the Secretary of the Presidency Gorkin. For the first time in its history, a speech was made in Hebrew in the Kremlin. This too caused a minor hitch. The Russians apparently did not want a speech in Hebrew and suggested that she speak in English as they did not have an interpreter. The Israelis proposed that she speak in Hebrew and Levavi would translate into Russian while Vlasov’s remarks would be translated into English by Levavi. The Russians were not enthusiastic over this idea and even looked for a Yiddish interpreter. Finally they relented and the Israelis scored a small victory. Golda spoke in Hebrew:

Mr. President, I am honored to present the letter of accreditation of the Government of Israel appointing me Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary to the Supreme Presidium of the Soviet Union. I have been charged to convey to you, to the Government of the Soviet Union and its people, the sincere greetings of the Government and people of Israel who hope that the friendly relations between us will deepen for the sake of the two states and for Peace in the entire world. I ask of you to grant me confidence in each matter that I will have the honor to bring before you on behalf of my Government.

Vlasov responded off the cuff. He expressed his hope that Mrs. Meyerson and her government would successfully act to develop the friendly ties between the two states for their mutual benefit. The ceremony ended with handshakes and a brief conversation in Vlasov’s office, with Zorin participating. They talked of the Arab refugees and British perfidy. Golda claimed that Britain used the plight of the Arab refugees to deflect attention from the plight of tens of thousands of Jewish refugees who they were still holding in detention camps in Cyprus, displaced persons camps in Germany and other places in Europe, who were not yet allowed to immigrate to Israel. Vlasov asked if Israel had a written constitution and Golda said it did not. Chief of Protocol Molotchkov said the Israelis behaved like professionals. A lunch accompanied by some vodka was held in Golda’s hotel room. She was now fully-accredited envoy of Israel and was formally able to get to work.<sup>19</sup>

Almost at once it became apparent that there was hardly any serious work to occupy her time. This did not only apply to the Israeli legation, but to the many other diplomatic missions as well. The Soviets were secretive and suspicious of all foreign diplomats who were considered spies at best. As there were hardly

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<sup>19</sup> Namir, pp. 42–44.

any trade relations and the legation did not issue immigrant visas, the contacts were limited to meetings with Soviet foreign ministry officials and some military officers. In the evenings, the Israelis were left to their own devices or met with other foreign diplomats and foreign correspondents. But the Russians had to publicize the Israeli presence although they knew it could be embarrassing to the regime in view of its policy towards Soviet Jewry. The day after the presentation of credentials ceremony, the Moscow newspapers carried an official statement detailing the presentation of credentials and mentioning the names of the new envoys, including that of Golda Meyerson. Now Soviet Jews knew there was an Israeli diplomatic presence in their midst. This triggered an explosive reaction that would erupt soon.

On the first Sabbath after the presentation of credentials, the entire legation staff appeared at the Moscow Great Synagogue. Their presence electrified the hundreds of worshippers, mostly elderly men and women. This scene was best described by Namir's 25-year-old daughter Yael who kept a diary:

On Saturday all of us went to the synagogue. Naturally we attracted great attention and there was much excitement. Most of us wept, not to mention them—men and women who sobbed excitedly. So began the Sabbath services. Then the men were called to the Torah, and of course there was deep silence. At the end of the prayers the rabbi wanted to meet Golda and this is where the emotions burst. Father, who went to get her, barely passed through the crowd because all amassed wanted to shake his hand, and there is no need to say that it was difficult to move when he returned with Golda. It was indescribable when every man and woman shook our hands, greeted us with thousands of blessings, called Mazel Tov and each of them recited 'Shehecheyanu.' The tears and the sobs burst out of everybody's eyes and throats...meanwhile Golda barely reached the rabbi and now the emotion extended beyond all limits, all applauded her and us and cries of 'Let the People of Israel Live' and 'Hoorah' erupted from all mouths.

It was 12 noon and now there was a break. A stream of young Jews came to the Synagogue, the excitement grew and their eyes burned. Clearly they knew they overstepped the limits and were risking themselves. But at this moment there burst out what was contained in all the years of their exile here and they were almost saying—'whatever will be—will be'. And so we started to leave the synagogue, but the crowd would not let us go and the entire congregation walked behind and around us. They were massed mainly around Golda. This created much attention in the street, which was not comfortable and not in their favor...We were very moved on that day and could barely speak.<sup>20</sup>

Among the first callers at the legation were three foreign correspondents—Henry Shapira of "United Press International", Edwin Newman of the "New York Herald Tribune" and the "Reuters" bureau chief in Moscow. They would become a major

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<sup>20</sup> Namir, pp. 49–50.

source of information for the Israelis and acted as their initial mentors in analyzing developments in the Soviet Union. The fall of 1948 witnessed a worsening in the Cold War. Czechoslovakia fell to Communism in February. The Berlin blockade was at its height with the Western allies flying in food and coal to the beleaguered city. The Chinese Communists were driving the Nationalists south and soon to Taiwan. The United States was on the eve of presidential elections and in the Middle East, newly established Israel launched another successful campaign against the Egyptian army in the Negev in mid-October. In Washington there was much uncertainty which way Israel would turn. Would it be pro-Western, pro-Soviet or at best remain neutral. These fears were fanned by the British Foreign Office in an effort to look better in Arab eyes, hinting that Israel was successful on the battlefield because of massive Soviet military aid. In Russia, this period witnessed the harshest Stalinist repression. In his final years he had become paranoid and deranged. He had also become virulently anti-Semitic. The Israeli “colony” was not fully aware of what was happening, as they were in fact isolated in the Soviet capital, with hardly any contact to ordinary Russian citizens, not to mention members of the Jewish community. Most of their information came from other diplomats, members of the foreign press corps and from foreign media and radio broadcasts, including the Israel Radio.

Golda was showing growing signs of impatience with diplomatic niceties and protocol, especially when she had to make customary courtesy calls on the heads of the diplomatic missions, at least those few who recognized Israel. This became a trying experience for her, as Lou Kadar later related. Lou accompanied her and acted as interpreter. In one such a visit the conversation went as follows:

Ambassador: “How did you arrive in Moscow?” Lou: Translates the question for Golda to Hebrew.

Golda: “What, don’t you know how we came here?”

Lou: “I do, but he wants to know.”

Golda: “So tell him by plane.”

Ambassador: “Where are you staying?” Lou: Translates the question.

Golda: “What, don’t you know where we are staying?”

Lou: “I do, but he does not.”

Golda: “So, tell him, at the Metropol Hotel.

This went on a number of times with Lou translating from French. On the third visit, Golda lost her patience, temper and interest. When Lou translated the trite question “he wants to know how we came to Moscow,” Golda said: “Tell His

Excellency the Ambassador that we arrived riding on donkeys”. Later, to the question where they were staying, Golda instructed Lou to say they were living “in a large tent”.<sup>21</sup>

Her conversations with Soviet officials were more serious. Her general instructions were to try to persuade the Soviets to help Israel’s war effort by supplying it with weapons, food and oil. She was also instructed to examine possibilities of allowing Soviet relatives of Israeli citizens to unite with their families, to establish cultural and artistic links and to see if anything could be done about opening the gates for massive Jewish emigration. On the eve of the opening of the United Nations General Assembly session in Paris, Golda called on Deputy Foreign Minister Valerian Zorin. Namir translated and took notes. Zorin mentioned the fact that Golda was born in Kiev, “but surely she remembers nothing of her childhood”. Golda responded icily: “True, apart from preparations for pogroms”. He let that one pass and addressed what the Russians called “The Jewish Question”. As far as the Soviet Union was concerned, this question did not exist, it applied only to non-Socialist countries. Zorin knew of Israel’s difficulties in absorbing immigrants and suggested that Israel’s role was to take immigrants from capitalist countries. It was obvious the Soviet Union had no intention of opening its gates for Jewish emigration. He expressed hope that Israel would be a progressive country, this being one of the reasons that “democratic” countries were among the first to recognize it. Golda elaborated on the Soviet role in the struggle for Israel’s independence and argued that there was no contradiction between mass immigration and the preservation of democratic values. The upbuilding of Israel and the existence of the Jewish people were organically linked to a world of peace, progress and freedom. Israel could absorb whoever wanted to come and she requested Soviet help in lifting restrictions on immigration. She also discussed other issues on the agenda of the UN General Assembly: Israel’s future borders, the Bernadotte Plan, Arab refugees, the Jerusalem problem and the British idea of a free port in Haifa, which she thought would enable Britain to retain control over the port and oil refineries in Haifa Bay. Zorin listened quietly and promised to bring her remarks to the attention of his government.

The next meeting on the same day was with Ivan Bakoulin, head of the Middle East Division of the Soviet Foreign Ministry. He repeated the official Soviet line that Jews streamed to Israel only from nondemocratic countries. That meant that Soviet Jews were not to be considered as candidates for immigration. He omitted to mention the fact that most of the immigrants who came to Israel in 1948 were from Eastern European countries. She said Israel was readying itself

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<sup>21</sup> Interview with Lou Kadar, *Yediot Achronot*, 12 December 1980.

to absorb a million immigrants in the next five years, including Jews from Arab countries whose lives were endangered. She missed the mark by a quarter of a million. During Israel's first five years 711,108 immigrants arrived. The millionth immigrant came in 1960. Bakoulin stated that only the struggle for socialism and democracy in many countries would help solve the Jewish problem in capitalist countries. This, of course, had nothing to do with the Soviet Union. Two days later she called on Vassily Gushev, one of Molotov's three deputies. He repeated the official line of supporting Israel.<sup>22</sup>

Other contacts with Soviet bodies were made by General Rattner. On October 5 he met with the deputy chief of staff of the Soviet armed forces, General Alexei Antonov, and presented an official Israeli request to have Israeli officers train in Russia and also asked for the supply of captured German weapons that the Red Army had seized in the Second World War. The Russians listened, took notes and did not react. Rattner asked for more specific instructions from Israel. But they were late in coming, probably because of the tense relations between Rattner and Ben-Gurion. The latter ignored Rattner's cables.<sup>23</sup>

Namir and other legation staff members sought to establish cultural ties. The Soviet government asked for specific ideas. Before leaving Israel, a number of Israeli institutions had asked Golda to help. The Philharmonic Orchestra wanted certain music notes by Soviet composers (eventually received) and visits by Soviet musicians (they were held in the 1960's). Habimah National Theater wanted a Soviet director (request denied). Plans were presented, but nothing happened. An attempt to raise the issue of family reunification was met by a counter proposal that they go through official channels. The Israelis persisted. The result was permission granted to four elderly and sick Jews to go to Israel. Russia also sold some wheat to Israel for American currency. In Paris, the Soviet delegate voted to admit Israel to the UN, but the proposal gained only five of the required seven votes in the Security Council. Israel was finally admitted to the UN in May 1949.

The legation moved to its new quarters on Glazovsky Prolok. Eiga Shapira was sent to Stockholm to purchase furniture. Household goods finally arrived from Israel. As the legation's budget was very limited, Golda decided to install a kibbutz regime: everybody would help with the work; they would all have one meal together and the rest separately. Products would be bought according to family size. During the first year, no salaries were paid. This kibbutz regime helped ease the budgetary constraints and prevented personal tensions. It is not clear if it impressed the collectivist Soviet mind and if they knew what was

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<sup>22</sup> Namir, pp. 52–56.

<sup>23</sup> Yochanan Rattner, *My Life and Myself*, Jerusalem, 1978, pp. 399–400.

happening inside the legation, apart from surreptitiously bugging the building. Perhaps other legations were impressed, but there is no evidence anyone else copied this system. The collectivist system of running an embassy in the motherland of socialism may have appealed to Golda and to the Israeli media, but it impressed no one else. The police prevented ordinary Jews from approaching the legation and they were deterred from doing so by the sight of many policemen around the building.

Golda's honeymoon with the Soviet regime lasted exactly 20 days. On September 21, 1948 there appeared in "Pravda" an article written by the well-known Jewish writer Ilya Ehrenburg. Its heading was "On the matter of a Certain Letter." It was a sort of an answer to one Alexander R. who sought clarification how the Soviet Union related to Israel. In his response, Ehrenburg adopted a pro-Israel but a sharp anti-Zionist stand. He claimed that the Soviet Union was among the first to recognize Israel fearing the Jewish state would become a satellite of Anglo-American capitalism and warned Israel from granting airbases on its territory to the Western powers. He added that the burden of Israel's defense was borne by the working class while the bourgeoisie enriched itself. But, and this was the key issue, had the establishment of the state solved the Jewish question. The answer was totally negative. The only solution to the Jewish problem was the "victory of progressive forces in the world, social and spiritual progress...the victory of socialism over capitalism, the victory of the exalted international principles over nationalism, fascism and racism". If the reactionary forces won, Israel would become a second Auschwitz. The fate of Jewish workers in all countries was tied to the future of progress, i. e. socialism. Together with all the Soviet people, the Jews were defending their Socialist homeland. They did not look to the Middle East, but to the future. He concluded that the workers of Israel, removed from Zionist mystique, were seeking justice by looking north towards the Soviet Union as it lead humanity to a better future.<sup>24</sup>

Ehrenburg's article should not have surprised Golda and her colleagues. The official line was given to her on September 15 by Zorin and Bakoulin separately. The article was followed by new and harsh persecution of Soviet Jews as a collective. The Yiddish weekly "Einikeit" was closed down and the Jewish anti-Fascist Committee ceased to exist. Apart from the Great Moscow Synagogue and the Jewish theater in the Soviet capital and in the autonomous Jewish region of Birobidzhan, all Jewish bodies went out of business. This anti-Jewish campaign was seen by the Israelis as the official Soviet reaction to the outburst of nationalist feelings which were hidden for almost thirty years of Soviet rule. It was

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<sup>24</sup> The article was fully quoted in Namir, pp. 242–250.

evident that the three decades since the Bolshevik revolution had not succeeded in erasing Jewishness and even Zionism out of many Jews. On the contrary, the establishment of Israel and the Soviet support for the Jewish State helped many Jews to focus on the renaissance of Jewish nationalism. The events of the past few months, mainly Israel's military achievements, only strengthened their national pride. The Soviet Government faced a major dilemma: should it consider Israel a friendly nation and encourage contact with its diplomats or should it be seen as a hostile state, whose diplomatic representatives must be isolated and their moves strictly controlled. They decided to make a distinction between Israel and Zionism: At this stage they opted to maintain support for Israel, but to continue the traditional anti-Zionist policy. Above all, strenuous efforts were exerted to dissuade Russian Jews from the notion that they abandon their present homeland and immigrate to their historic homeland. Massive Jewish emigration could open a Pandora Box and implant similar ideas among other Soviet national minorities.

The Israeli representatives decided to at least try and establish some contact with the Jews of Moscow and show presence whenever and wherever possible. They went to the Jewish theater. At the end of the performance their cars were surrounded by silent Jews. But the main place to meet the Jews was the Great Moscow Synagogue. Golda was not a noted synagogue goer, but she understood that this was the place where she would meet the Jews. And she was right. The excitement reached its peak on the first day of the Jewish New Year, when thousands of Jews massed in the streets leading to the Synagogue and applauded the Israelis. An eyewitness described the scene: "I saw an erect woman with burning eyes, plain, modest, daughter of the ancient Jewish people. It was Golda. Everyone ran after her. Persecuted and landless, tearful Jews followed tearful Golda, touched her dress, kissed her clothing. She advanced slowly, but they did not let her move and shouted: Golda, Golda, Golda". According to many accounts, fifty thousand Jews crammed near and inside the synagogue. Two banners hung in the synagogue: "The People of Israel Live" and "On 14 May the State of Israel Was Proclaimed". Both slogans quickly disappeared. Golda was among the first to leave the synagogue at the conclusion of the services and was at once engulfed by a sea of people. What happened next was best described by Golda in "My Life":

As we had planned, we went to the synagogue on Rosh Hashana. All of us—the men, women and children of the legation—dressed in our best clothes, as befitted Jews on a Jewish holiday. But the street in front of the synagogue had changed. Now it was filled with people, packed together like sardines, hundreds and hundreds of them, of all ages, including Red Army officers, soldiers, teenagers and babies carried in their parents' arms. Instead of the 2000-odd Jews who usually came to the synagogue on the holidays, a crowd of close to 50,000 people was waiting for us. For a minute I could not grasp what had happened—or even who they were. And then it dawned on me. They had come—those good, brave Jews—in

order to be with us, to demonstrate their sense of kinship and to celebrate the establishment of the State of Israel. Within seconds they had surrounded me, almost lifting me bodily, almost crushing me, saying my name over and over again. Eventually they parted ranks and let me enter the synagogue, but there, too, the demonstration went on. Every now and then, in the women's gallery, someone would come to me, touch my hand, stroke or even kiss my dress. Without speeches or parades, without any words at all really, the Jews of Moscow were proving their profound desire—and their need—to participate in the miracle of the establishment of the Jewish state, and I was the symbol of the state for them.

I couldn't talk, or smile, or wave my hand. I sat in that gallery like a stone, without moving, with those thousands of eyes fixed on me. There is no such entity as the Jewish people, Ehrenburg had written. The State of Israel meant nothing to the Jews of the USSR! But his warning had fallen on deaf ears. For thirty years we and they had been separated. Now we were together again, and as I watched them, I knew that no threat, however awful, could possibly have stopped the ecstatic people I saw in the synagogue that day from telling us, in their own way, what Israel meant to them. The service ended and I got up to leave, but I could hardly walk. I felt as though I had been caught up in a torrent of love so strong that it had literally taken my breath away and slowed down my heart. I was on the verge of fainting, I think. But the crowd still surged around me, stretching out its hands and saying 'Nasha Golda' (our Golda) and Shalom, Shalom and crying.

Out of that ocean of people, I can still see two figures clearly: a little man who kept popping up in front of me and saying, 'Goldele, leben zolst du. Shana Tova' (Golda, a long life to you and a Happy New Year) and a woman who just kept repeating, 'Goldele, Goldele!' and smiling and blowing kisses at me.

It was impossible for me to walk back to the hotel...someone pushed me into a cab. But the cab couldn't move either because the crowd was cheering; laughing, weeping Jews had engulfed it. I wanted to say something, anything, to those people, to let them know that I begged their forgiveness for not having wanted to come to Moscow and for not having known the strength of their ties to us. For having wondered, in fact, whether there was still a link between them and us. But I couldn't find the words. All I could say clumsily, and in a voice that didn't even sound like my own, was one sentence in Yiddish. I stuck my head out of the window of the cab and said: 'A dank eich vos ihr seit geblieben Yidden' (Thank you for having remained Jews)...<sup>25</sup>

Back at the hotel she was drained. But she realized that the Soviet Union, with all its might, had failed to break the spirit of Soviet Jews. They remained Jews. This was, probably, the largest spontaneous, unofficial demonstration in Moscow since 1917. Jews followed her all the way back to the hotel. The scene was repeated on Yom Kippur, but because of the solemn nature of this holiday, it was more restrained. This time a police escort paved the way for Golda. But hundreds of Jews insisted on walking next to her car to and from the hotel. During the Yizkor (Remembrance) prayer, the rabbi eulogized the millions of Jews who died in

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25 Meir, *My Life*, p. 183.



the Holocaust and recited a special prayer for Israeli soldiers who fell for their country. General Rattner saluted and the crowd burst into bitter tears.

The huge emotional tension waned after the holidays. But the Israeli community made sure it attended synagogue on the first and eighth day of Sukkot and Simchat Torah, not to mention ordinary Sabbaths. Golda thought somewhat naively that if she succeeds in meeting with a large number of Jews something would happen. But she was wrong. She may have even convinced herself that if she met Ehrenburg for a chat and presented her views to him, she would bring him to change his mind, and sought ways to meet him, although she did not harbor many illusions. A British reporter attempted to arrange a meeting but failed. The opportunity arose in a reception at the Czech embassy. The American Ambassador to Moscow, General Walter Beddel Smith, described the meeting in his memoirs:

During an official reception, I was talking to the Israeli Minister, Mrs. Golda Myerson, when she mentioned the bitterness of some of Ehrenburg's articles and remarked that she would like to meet him, since she believed she could convince him that he was mistaken in his hostility to Israel. I asked one of my diplomatic officers to find him and bring him to meet the Minister. In a few minutes Ehrenburg came up, and after some conversation, through an interpreter, Mrs. Myerson asked him if he spoke English. Ehrenburg, who speaks excellent French, looked at her for a moment and replied in Russian— 'I do not speak English and have no regard for a Russian-born Jew who does speak English'. Golda was deeply hurt and offended, but Ehrenburg's rude and brutal behavior taught her a lesson she never would have believed or accepted from another source.<sup>26</sup>

Ambassador Smith did not catch Golda's reply to Ehrenburg: "I am sorry for Jews who don't speak Hebrew or at least Yiddish".

On November 7, Golda, Rattner and Namir watched the Revolution-Day parade in Red Square. That evening, Molotov held a reception during which he invited Golda to drink a toast of vodka. She congratulated him on the impressive parade and added: "If we had some some of the weapons displayed..." His reply was: "It will come, we too started from scratch". On this occasion she met Molotov's wife, Ivy, who confessed to Golda that she was Jewish, saying in Yiddish: "Ich bin a Yiddishe Tochter". Golda introduced her to her daughter Sarah and to Yael Namir, and Mrs. Molotov, with tears in her eyes, blessed the three women: "Be healthy, if all will be well with you, all will be well for Jews everywhere". A few weeks later, Mrs. Molotov disappeared for the next four years. Clearly she was banished for this display of her Jewishness.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Walter B. Smith, *My Three Years in Moscow*, New York, 1950, pp. 273–275.

<sup>27</sup> Namir, pp. 82–64; see also Simon Sebbagh, *Stalin—the Court of the Red Czar* (Hebrew version), Or Yehuda, 2006, pp. 629–631.

Prior to this meeting, Golda's hints to Molotov that Israel could not wait forever for the Arabs to come to peace talks while their armies were on Israeli territory were finally made real. On October 15, Ben-Gurion ordered the IDF to relieve the besieged northern Negev and in a lightning campaign the IDF occupied Beer-Sheba and drove the Egyptian army to the Gaza Strip. The campaign was over when the UN once again ordered a cease-fire. This time Israel was threatened with sanctions if her army did not return to the lines it had held prior to the campaign. Israel bided its time, did not withdraw and accepted a Canadian proposal to start armistice negotiations to end the war.

In a meeting with Bakoulin's deputy, Chiborin, Golda explained the reasons for the campaign as spelled out in the instructions she received from Tel Aviv. She elaborated on the IDF's achievements and mentioned the Galilee, parts of which were still under Arab control. She cited rumors that Lebanon was interested in annexing these parts to its own territory. Chiborin carefully wrote down her words and as usual said he would pass them on to his superiors. He did report one positive development: The Soviet Union had decided to support Israel's application for membership in the International Postal Union.

In spite of the IDF's impressive achievements in the recent operations in the Negev and, at the end of October in Galilee, when it drove out all Arab forces from that part of Palestine and even captured a number of villages in southern Lebanon, Ben-Gurion feared that the war was not yet over and that the IDF urgently needed additional weapons. Golda and Rattner delivered to the Soviet foreign ministry a long list of arms requests that included 45 T-34 tanks with ammunition, spare parts and spare engines, 25 light tanks, 45 37mm cannons with ammunition, 24 self-propelled artillery pieces, 180 88mm anti-aircraft "Beaufors" artillery pieces, 10 field artillery pieces of 75mm or 25 pounders, 24 6-inch Howitzers and/or 5.5-inch artillery, 50 "Spitfire" or "Mustang" fighters, 24 light bombers of either "Beaufighter" or "Mosquito" type, 20 medium "Boston" type bombers and 25 "Mitchel" type bombers including spare parts and ammunition. All this equipment was of World War Two vintage that was supplied to the Russians by their then British and American allies.

She explained to Bakoulin that these quantities were needed in view of British intrigues in the Middle East. Rattner elaborated on the military side and said that Israel's assumption was that the war would continue at a higher technological level, and since the United States imposed an arms embargo and the UN could not be relied upon, Israel must prepare for the worst-case scenario. Bakoulin replied that he was aware of a UN arms embargo in the Middle East, but added that the Soviet Union knew that Britain had violated the embargo. Golda said that the UN could not control its members, a number of whom ignored its resolutions. Luckily for Israel, there was one country that supported it in its darkest hours and in

any case what Israel was asking for were captured weapons. Bakoulin refused to accept the list, saying there was no need for it until a decision in principle would be made. Golda asked for an early reply as she was about to travel to Paris to meet Sharett. But the Soviet Union did not react to Israel's requests at all. On the contrary, it ordered Czechoslovakia to suspend its arms sales to Israel and to shut a flying school for IDF pilots near Prague.<sup>28</sup>

On the third week of November, Golda flew to Paris for a series of meetings with Sharett and members of the Israeli UN Delegation. Sharett also summoned to Paris Israel's Ministers to Prague and Warsaw. On November 25, Golda, Avriel and Barzilai reported that the gates for Jewish emigration from Eastern Europe were slowly closing and could be completely shut within six months. This meant there was now dire urgency to speed up the exit of all Jews who wanted to immigrate from Hungary, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Romania and Bulgaria. Golda explained that from what she heard from Soviet officials, there would be no immigration from the Soviet Union.

Paris was a bit of fresh air after the stifling ten weeks in Moscow. To close friends Golda candidly admitted there was not much for her to do in Moscow and she was highly frustrated and hoped to be recalled to Israel soon, certainly after the forthcoming elections to the first Knesset due to be held on January 25, 1949. She complained of the absence of orderly contact with Israel and felt she was cut off from the central political arena. From Paris she flew to Israel, where she arrived on December 5. A day later she saw Ben-Gurion, delivered four books he had requested (as he noted in his diary) and complained of her situation. They lunched together and it can be safely assumed that Ben-Gurion informed her that she would be included in the Mapai list of candidates for the elections for the first Knesset and that she would become a cabinet member.<sup>29</sup> This would be the proper excuse to remove her from Moscow without hurting the delicate Israel-Soviet relations. She spent a month in Israel, actively participating in the election campaign. The fact that formally she was a civil servant and as such prevented from participating in any political activity did not bother her or others. There was no civil service code in Israel at the time: if generals could address election rallies, why not diplomats? She also addressed a Histadrut rally in Tel Aviv and declared that the "most precious asset we have is the unity of the labor movement. Let us hope that we shall bring about a Hebrew-Socialist state. Let us hope that we achieve all our dreams".<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Namir, pp. 75–77; Rattner, *My Life*, pp. 399–400.

<sup>29</sup> War Diary, p. 839, pp. 864–866.

<sup>30</sup> Braslavsky, *History of the Israel Labor Movement*, Vol. IV, p. 168.

In Tel Aviv she participated in meetings where decisions were made to launch another military campaign to expel the remnant of the Egyptian army from the territory of mandated Palestine. On December 22 the IDF launched operation “Ayn” which was over by January 7, 1949, when IDF units that crossed the international border into Sinai were ordered back as a result of a joint Anglo-American ultimatum that Israel withdraw within three days. In spite of strenuous opposition by the commanders of the southern front, led by Yigal Allon and Yitzhak Rabin, Ben-Gurion caved in. For its part, Egypt agreed to enter into armistice negotiations which began on January 13 on the island of Rhodes and were concluded on February 24 with the signing of the first Israel-Arab Armistice Agreement.

Golda went back to Moscow two weeks before the elections. Because of poor connections, she had to fly via Rome, Zagreb, Budapest and Prague. On January 19, 1949, she met Bakoulin and reported on the latest developments. As usual, and perhaps to appease the Russians, she attacked the British role in the recent developments and called it obstructionist. She also blamed Britain for placing hurdles on direct Israeli-Jordanian and Israeli-Lebanese talks. She also attempted to obtain from Bakoulin information as to his government’s response to Israel’s weapons request and mentioned that Israel’s ability to produce some of its own weapons had dramatically improved. He ignored the hint and she moved on to describe the massive immigration wave streaming towards Israel, the various development and housing plans and the role played by American Jews.<sup>31</sup> A day later she called on the new Soviet foreign minister, Andrei Vishinsky, the replacement of Molotov, who had become the prime minister. Vishinsky was fully aware of Israel’s situation, having had a number of meetings in Paris with Sharett. After conversing about the idea of the kibbutz and Israel’s farm development plans, Golda asked for Soviet permission for family reunification. His reply to this request was: “It’s a highly complicated matter. A. Each case has to be discussed separately. B. This is not within the authority of the foreign ministry but of ‘appropriate institutions’. C. Once permission is given, this entails giving up Soviet citizenship. D. Authorization to give up citizenship is in the hands of the Presidency of the Ministerial Council, in short, a very complicated procedure”. A request to have radio equipment installed in the legation was not acted upon. Golda assumed this was a lost case. It was typical of the slow change of Soviet attitude towards Israel.<sup>32</sup>

In the last days of January she kept herself busy by meeting with other diplomats and awaited the elections results. As expected, Mapai won 35 % of the votes

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<sup>31</sup> Namir, pp. 98–100.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 100.

and would form the axis around which a coalition government would be constructed. Ben-Gurion cabled her inviting her to join his cabinet. On February 3, Sharett cabled her: “The growth in our strength as a result of the elections determined in my eyes from the first moment your inclusion in the cabinet. I was sad that Ben-Gurion’s cable was sent without my knowledge or co-signature. I have no doubt about your reply and assume you will return in March or even earlier if you see fit. Namir will act as Charge and upon your return we shall discuss a replacement. Please advise your plans soonest. Moshe”.<sup>33</sup>

She preferred to ignore this cable which she thought patronizing. In any case, decisions of this nature were made by Ben-Gurion and not by Sharett. Perhaps Sharett wanted to make sure that she remembered that he, too, wanted her to be appointed to the cabinet. She failed to see the need for his cable. From now on she would be Sharett’s peer and not his subordinate. It was evident that these arrangements were made by her and Ben-Gurion in December, perhaps even as early as August.

Four days later, the Soviets decided to deliver a small blow to the Israelis. With no prior warning, Golda was summoned to Zorin’s office and he read to her a written statement prepared by the Soviet Foreign Ministry. It contained a rebuke to the Israeli legation for having mailed letters to Jewish citizens encouraging them to leave their homeland, give up their nationality and immigrate to Israel. The foreign ministry suggested that Israel desist from such acts. The legation was also asked to suspend its news bulletin in Russian that was circulated to government offices, the media, libraries and Jewish communities. All contact with Soviet citizens must be maintained through the foreign ministry. Golda took this calmly, saying that the legation did not encourage Jews to leave the Soviet Union and the news bulletin would be suspended. In all, the legation printed four new bulletins and circulated them to 150 addresses. She claimed that this was done due to lack of knowledge and experience. The conversation was chilly and even brutal and showed that Israel-Soviet relations had entered a new, negative, phase. Russia also ordered its satellites to limit Jewish emigration and the arms deliveries from Czechoslovakia were suspended. Russia was highly critical of Israel when it accepted an American loan in January 1949, which indicated to the Russians that Israel was leaning to the West. Golda’s views were quite simple: Israel must be part of the free world. Her very brief experience in Moscow demonstrated to her that nothing good would come from the Socialist world. The meeting with Zorin left a bad taste. It was a pity to end her mission on such a note.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 111.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 109–111.

Prior to officially departing from Russia, she was back in Israel and on March 8, in a very moving ceremony, she was sworn as member of the Constituent Assembly of Israel (soon to become the First Knesset). She would remain a Knesset member for the next twenty-five years. In a conversation with Ben-Gurion, he raised a new idea: she should become deputy prime minister responsible for development. She rejected the offer. The title and responsibilities were too vague to her taste and would entail basically coordination, and as a consequence, much friction with various government departments. So she said to him plainly: “Not this! I understand nothing about development. I don’t want to be deputy prime minister. I want to be minister of labor”.<sup>35</sup> Ben-Gurion did not insist. On March 10, she swore allegiance as minister of housing and labor. From then until 1974, with a three-year hiatus, she would be a cabinet minister and in 1969 rise to the top of the mast.

The ministry of labor was at the time headed by Mapam minister Mordechai Bentov. He suggested a meeting to hand over of the ministry. She refused to enter into details regarding structure and personnel until her return from Moscow. In early April, she was back in the Soviet capital for a round of farewell events. The central event was held in the legation. Only two heads of missions were noted for their absence—the British and the Turkish. However, all Soviet artists, musicians and writers, many of them Jews, who were invited decided not to appear. On the first day of Passover, the Israeli colony once again strode to the synagogue where Golda would make her last call. Perhaps on purpose, her final meeting with Vishinsky was set immediately after the end of the service to ensure there would be no repeat of the demonstrations that took place in September.

Facing Vishinsky, she told him that Israel decided to pursue a neutral foreign policy. She would not become an American satellite nor join a military bloc. Israel would not permit Britain, or any other country, to maintain air bases on its territory. Vishinsky was pleased to hear this. He was less happy when Golda added that Israel would maintain friendly relations with the United States and with American Jews, but would not permit external interference with her domestic affairs. “Our government is a coalition, and even if there are workers’ parties who are not a part of it, there is a majority of Socialists in the government and its intention is to build Israel as a Socialist country”. No one knows who authorized her to make such a statement, but since she made it, and now being a member of the cabinet, her words must have carried added weight. She mentioned Israel’s request for weapons. Vishinsky said he would look into the matter, adding “that in any case this is a risky and complicated matter. It’s enough that we give you a small pistol,

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<sup>35</sup> Meir, *My Life*, p. 186.

people will say we gave you an atomic bomb”. She then asked for Soviet intervention with the Hungarian and Romanian governments to allow emigration of more Jews. Her arguments were original. There were almost half a million Jews in these two countries. With all the urgency and importance attached to bringing Jews from Morocco, Tunisia and Algeria, “we cannot construct our edifice with these immigrants alone”. This comment, perhaps unintentional, meant that while she did not reject immigration of Jews from North Africa, she may have thought that they could be brought to Israel later while Eastern European Jews would languish for years behind the Iron Curtain. Vishinsky’s reply was equally interesting: “This is an important political question. Romania and Hungary are still fighting for their existence against a very strong reaction at home. The Jews are more loyal to the new regimes than others...” In this manner the Soviet foreign minister complimented the Jews while slurring the others, and all this to the Israeli minister. Golda knew well that behind Vishinsky’s relaxed and pleasant mien, there lurked the vicious prosecutor of the Moscow trials of the 1930’s and Stalin’s most loyal servant. Now he was beaming, but this did not hide the fact that the meeting yielded no concrete results. She bid farewell to him in Hebrew—Shalom. On April 30 she closed this chapter in her life and flew back to Israel.<sup>36</sup>

The seven months in Moscow were a time of enormous frustration for her, accompanied by a sense of failure. She failed to promote any of the subjects she was entrusted with. No one expected her to produce miracles, but only a few knew this was a mission impossible. Some may have thought that her personality would breach the walls. But no one accused her of failing. The objective balance of gains and failures was done later by her replacement in the post, Mordechai Namir:

- “Military supplies and training—no reply.
- Permission to install radio transmitter in the legation—no reply.
- Permission to print and circulate news bulletin—denied.
- Exit permits for four Russians with Israeli citizenship—rejected.
- 80 certificates issued by the legation to Soviet citizens to leave Russia—denied.
- 4 requests to have children unite with their parents in Israel—no reply.
- Search for missing relatives—the legation was told to see the Soviet Red Cross.
- Various certificates for Israeli citizens (birth, death certificates, diplomas). 3 resulted in positive reply, 4 said the documents could not be found, 3 no reply.
- Query regarding legal status of property owned by Jews in East Germany—no reply.
- Request by an Israeli to have his blind son treated in Russia—denied.
- Four requests to permit immigration of aged parents—they should see the local militia.
- Request for the Soviet Consular Code—answer: see the State Codex.

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<sup>36</sup> Namir, pp. 116–121.

- Visit by Golda to a day-care center near Moscow—Bakoulin said he sent it to Protocol.
- Sale of wheat—approved.
- Music notes to the Israel Philharmonic—sent.
- Immigration of Jews from Harbin to Israel via Siberia—let each immigrant apply to the local Soviet Consul. He will decide.<sup>37</sup>

For a restless, impatient and active woman, Moscow proved to be a most trying experience and she heaved a sigh of relief when she was called home. She was like a bird in a frozen cage. Apart from one meeting with Molotov and two with Vishinsky, she never met Stalin or other senior ministers. Her contacts were confined to middle or lower-level foreign ministry officials. Cocktail parties and diplomatic receptions bored her. She did not drink or engage in ballroom dancing. In Moscow the Hora was not a popular dance. She did not show much interest in diplomatic gossip, in dresses or cooking, subjects she thought idle but were much discussed in such gatherings. The wives of other heads of missions did not interest her. Happily her daughter, son-in-law and some close friends served with her in Moscow and provided company in the long winter nights. Since she was not an avid reader and could not read the Russian press, she was confined to reading English and Hebrew newspapers that arrived late. Her cables to Israel were drafted by Namir and Levavi. Her good common sense led her to understand what was happening around her, but since she treated her mission as a temporary one at best, she made no effort to study in depth the problems facing the Soviet Union. She was not allowed to travel outside Moscow. She did not even ask to visit Kiev or Pinsk. Above all she had a terrible feeling of being cut off from Soviet Jews. For her, Russia was “a cold land of suspicion, hostility and silence...a country of obvious social inequalities, the general anxiety and fear of the population, the isolation in which the diplomatic corps went through its paces—all depressed me unspeakably...” In her memoirs, she dwelt only on the Jewish side of her mission and did not detail her talks with Molotov, Vishinsky, Zorin and Bakoulin. She omitted any mention of Israel’s arms requests.

Yet, she lit a spark that in time would become a flame. Years later, she said: “if they have sent a broom to Moscow and said it represented the State of Israel, it would have been accorded the same reception by Soviet Jews”. But she was a very special broom. Since she was born in Russia, she felt a close affinity with this huge community. Had it not been for her family immigrating to America, she would have been part of the Jews of Silence as Elie Wiesel would later call them. She had a sense of guilt for not achieving more for them. In Russia she was prevented from using her most effective weapon—her ability to persuade in

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<sup>37</sup> Namir, pp. 132–134.



face-to-face meetings. Her contacts with Soviet officialdom prevented this. Soviet policy was not determined by personal persuasions. At best she could have convinced other diplomats (which she wrongly considered a waste of time) and foreign correspondents.

When she arrived in Moscow, she saw herself not only as the official representative of the State of Israel but also of world Jewry and the Zionist movement. This ensured that the Soviet government would make her life difficult and would try to trip her up at every opportunity. The only ray of light was the few meetings with Jews in synagogue. She left them with a ray of hope. From then on, she did not leave any stone unturned and did all she could to open the gates. She was lucky they did open partially when she was prime minister of Israel. No wonder that for Soviet Jews, Golda became a symbol of the new state. They called her *Nasha Golda*—our Golda, and *Golda Seretse*—Golda our heart.

Her experience in Moscow also taught her the need for patience and self-discipline in view of her contacts with a tyrannical and oppressive regime. She developed a healthy respect for the Soviet military might and its war machine, above all its ability to wreak havoc on small nations. She realized that diplomacy was an important tool, but diplomats are basically exalted civil servants posted near a telephone or wireless awaiting instructions from home. They had almost no latitude to develop independent initiatives. She knew that in any case there was no room for personal initiative in the Soviet Union. Her respect for diplomats and diplomacy did not grow as a result of her Moscow experience. This would become evident when she served as foreign minister for ten years. Then she did not allow her diplomats to develop individual initiatives save those posted in Third World countries. She kept the reins tightly in her hands.

From icy Moscow in the final years of the Stalin era, to her Israel barely a year old and in spite of the necessary austerity, seemed like paradise. To this paradise she now came back, this time to a position from which she could influence directly the building of Israeli society. She was met at the airport as a heroine. Sharett was on hand to greet her. Editorials sang her praises. But being a very level-headed woman, she had no illusions as to what she really achieved in Moscow. She was now happy that finally an opportunity was given to her to play a central role in the government of Israel, and this time as an equal member of the small group of key decision-makers in the party and in the cabinet.

## 10 The Seven Good Years (1949–1956)

“My seven beautiful years”, this was what Golda called her term in the Ministry of Labor. And, indeed, this was an era of creation—housing, absorption, employment and legislation, of doing many positive things and creating from scratch, in contradiction to what she considered sterile diplomacy. She recalled those years as time of intensive activity, full of events, of deep and personal total involvement. She had many reasons to enjoy her new ministry. Firstly because this Department of Labor and Construction (later it was renamed Ministry of Labor and National Insurance) was virtually brand-new. Contrary to other ministries that evolved from the various departments of the Jewish Agency, such as Foreign Affairs and Treasury, Golda was able to her office according to her perceptions and conceptions. The first minister, Mordechai Bentov of Mapam, headed the office from May 1948 until April 1949. He did not have enough time to create lasting procedures and working habits. By the time Golda took over, most of the senior officials appointed by Bentov had left and she could build the office according to her views and staff it with her own appointees. Also, apart from budgetary constraints, there was no intervention by other ministers in the affairs of this office and she could actually do whatever she saw fit in such fields as legislation, housing, building Israel’s infrastructure and finding employment. Furthermore, this time she dealt with human beings and not with philosophical discussions. Now she saw herself implementing the Zionist dream and vision, in this process, so she hoped, she would lead Israel to becoming a true Socialist state. Naturally, throughout those years she made sure that Mapai remained the dominant party in all that pertained to immigrant absorption and employment, so that the new immigrants would understand who ruled Israel and cast their vote accordingly on election day. Now that she dealt again with constructive matters and not with metaphysical items, this was very much in line with her character. According to her view and that of her party, the state must be the central institution that directed the economy, assured the physical livelihood of its citizens and helped them obtain medical services, old age pensions and insurance, insurance for sickness and work-related accidents, birth allowance and paid vacation, let alone education. However, she also believed that each must contribute his share by hard work and not rely only on the state. Already in those early days she came out against the culture that became known as “it’s due to me”. This was not expressed in handing out jobs. She never adhered to the principle that she was promised let alone owed a certain position, this term did not exist in her dictionary.

Israel was in the midst of a huge demographic revolution in those days. When Golda entered the Ministry of Labor, the rate of immigration was 30,000

a month, or a 1,000 a day. From the day of the establishment of Israel until the ebbing of the massive first wave of immigrants in 1953, some 700,000 immigrants came to Israel. In 1948, there were 102,000, 240,000 came in 1949, 170,000 in 1950 and 175,000 in 1951. Most of the immigrants who came in 1948 and 1949 came from Eastern Europe, from the displaced persons camps in Germany and from the detention camps in Cyprus. In the course of 1949 and 1950, almost the entire Yemenite Jewish community arrived in an operation called “Magic Carpet” in which 49,000 were airlifted from Yemen. In 1950, another airlift was launched, this time from Iraq, in an operation code-named “Ezra and Nehemiah” that brought 124,000 Jews to Israel. By then, almost the entire Jewish communities of Bulgaria and Yugoslavia had also arrived. Jews flowed to Israel sometime on foot from Syria and Lebanon, by sea and air from Egypt, Turkey, and Iran. By the end of 1950, the Jewish population of Israel had doubled.

There was a sense of a race against time. The leadership felt that as long as the gates of the Eastern European Communist nations were open, all effort must be undertaken to bring all the Jews from there. In Arab countries, pogroms occurred already in 1945, intensified in 1947 and in 1948, other forms of anti-Jewish persecutions were enacted and this meant that Jews had to be moved out of Arab countries as quickly as possible lest their lives be endangered. But in contrast to this messianic sense of the ingathering of the exiles, there was the harsh reality of Israel, a country that had barely emerged from a war of independence, whose economy was almost shattered. This tiny Jewish community that had absorbed many blows in recent years, in the struggle against the British and in the long War of Independence, now had to quickly and efficiently absorb some 800,000 immigrants (the number of immigrants who came from 1948 to 1956). It did not have the means for that Herculean task and it was natural that soon there would begin a searing debate on what became known as selective immigration. Those immigrants who arrived during the 1948 war were settled in former British army camps and in towns abandoned by Arabs—Jaffa, Ramle and Lod, as well as neighborhoods evacuated by Arabs in Haifa, Safed and Tiberias. The massive flow continued to arrive. Emissaries of the Jewish Agency Immigration Department spread the word of the creation of a Jewish state in the Atlas Mountains in Morocco, in the bazaars of Iran, in the faraway communities in Cochin and even in Shanghai in China. They acted under the messianic vision of the return of the people to their ancient homeland and called on the Jews to immigrate at once, paying scant attention to the absorptive capacity of the country. The irony was that the slogan “the country’s absorptive capacity” coined by the British to limit Jewish immigration to Palestine was now used by some of Israel’s leaders for that very same purpose. They argued that most of the hundreds of thousands of people immigrating were penniless, with no prior preparation, most of them

with no skills, made a living in petty trades and peddling, many of them broken physically and emotionally, many social and mental cases, sick and aged whose families were happy to get rid of them by sending them to Israel to be looked after by the Jewish state.

In July 1950, a thorough discussion was held in the Coordinating Committee of the Government of Israel and the Jewish Agency, in which Finance Minister Eliezer Kaplan demanded that immigration be restricted due to severe budgetary constraints. He called for a sane immigration policy and said that Israel had reached a budgetary saturation point. Golda was sharply critical. She said that it was unacceptable that the budget was considered the only criterion for determining the immigration policy. As long as there was a chance to save Jews, it must be done. She added: “Before immigration was permitted from Romania, we were not debating over costs, conditions and age. If Russia allowed Jews to leave, I do not believe that Kaplan would give them up. There is an illusion regarding Romania, who can act almost like Russia. This is not a statistical matter”.<sup>1</sup> First hints of the closure of the gates of Eastern Europe appeared in 1949 and Golda feared they would be sealed for ever. The discussion was also political: The Jewish Agency’s Immigration Department was controlled by the National Religious Party whose emissaries wanted to bring as many Jews as possible irrespective of their physical and mental state or their skills. They hoped in this way to strengthen their hold on the new immigrants, in view of the fact that many of the Jews who came from Arab countries were religious, while the immigrants from Europe were mostly secular. Mapai’s leaders faced a tough dilemma. They were responsible for the immigrant’s absorption, but they too had political expectations from the immigrants. As usual, Ben-Gurion had the final say.

He determined the policy, according to which there would be no selection based on age, health, education and family size. The unlimited immigration rate must be continued. There could not be a selection between Jews. That month the most Zionist law of the State of Israel was enacted—the Law of Return that granted every Jew the right to immigrate to Israel and become a citizen. Ben-Gurion understood that mass immigration creates enormous problems, but he thought the problems would be limited only to those he called “the desert generation”. He expected that the children of the “desert generation” would be the ones to build the Jewish state. The open-door policy which Ben-Gurion insisted

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<sup>1</sup> Yitzhak Rafael, “The Mass Immigration, its Structure, Characteristics and Influences”, in Idan, *Immigrants and Maabarot 1948–1952*, Jerusalem, 1987, p. 23; for the basic study of Golda Meir in this period see Dan Giladi, “Immigrant Absorption, Labor and Social Legislation—the Intensity of Action 1949–1956”, in Avizohar, ed., *Golda—Rise of a Leader*, pp. 251–376; see also Yossi Goldstein, *Eshkol—A Political Biography*, Tel Aviv, 2003, pp. 288–352.

on was based on his concept that a small Israel, with small population, albeit of high human quality, would not survive in the midst of the sea of Arab hatred and would be doomed to extinction and like the Crusaders state it would be a passing phenomenon in history. A large population would grant it greater legitimacy and its sovereignty would not be challenged. Once again he proved to be a man of vision, although in the long run that policy hurt his own party. At this time Golda gave in to the demands of some of her senior officials and agreed to establish an immigrant transit camp for immigrants from North Africa near Marseilles to regulate somewhat the flow of the mass immigration to the economically stretched Israel.

Housing was one of the most complex issues and became the best example of the improvisation typical to those times. Under the conditions prevailing in Israel in those days, nothing could be planned. No one could predict how many immigrants would arrive, from where and of which social strata, how much money would be at the disposal of the government and what would be the security situation. Hence the need for improvisation and that became the norm. The problem arose when Golda became used to improvising and did not engage in long-term planning; these habits could not be changed even after she became foreign minister and later prime minister. In the early years, there was no choice but to act like this. But in the early 1970's it was already possible to operate in an orderly manner and get used to a proper decision-making process. However, this did not happen and may have been one of the indirect causes for not anticipating events on the eve of the Yom Kippur War. One subject that she planned in an exemplary fashion was social legislation and the establishment of the National Insurance Institute.

At this stage, the new immigrants were housed in abandoned towns and later at the edges of the larger cities where most of the local authorities preferred to have them live. Naturally, this resulted in the development of slums at the periphery of the big cities such as Hatikva Quarter in Tel Aviv, the Katamons and Musrara in Jerusalem, Wadi Salib in Haifa and some neighbourhoods in Jaffa. Most of the municipalities preferred to ignore what was already called "the second Israel". A meaningful change occurred only in 1971 when Golda, as prime minister, established the Prime Minister's Committee for Children in Distress, a subject close to her heart. The first orderly treatment of these deprived neighbourhoods was undertaken as late as 1977 during the regime of Menachem Begin and was called "Project Renewal", partly funded by Diaspora Jewry.

When the abandoned towns and city slums were filled to capacity, a temporary solution was found that eventually became a long-term solution, that of housing new immigrants in tents and huts. The solution was called "maabara", temporary or transition camp. This was the result of lack of funds, land, cement

and other building materials that had to be imported and paid for in foreign currency that was unavailable. The father of the idea was Finance Minister Levi Eshkol. The maabara was also designed to achieve another goal, that of dispersing the population throughout Israel instead of them crowding in the center of the country. Many maabarot would be set up in the peripheral areas so that eventually once permanent housing would be built the immigrants would remain there.

The winter of 1950–1951 was unusually cold, rainy and it even snowed in some parts of Israel. Tens of thousands of new immigrants huddled idly in the maabarot since there was no employment for them. The majority did not speak Hebrew and were badly affected by the sharp and rapid move from their country of origin to Israel, then in the midst of the era of austerity. Most of the veteran population was not organized, interested and patient enough to absorb the new immigration. It preferred to relax and begin to enjoy life after years of deprivation and struggle. In order to block the rising living standard of the well established population and enable a just and equal distribution of food products that were barely available, from 1949 to 1954 Israel went through a period of austerity designed to put some order in the economy. During the discussion on austerity in the Knesset, Golda delivered a demagogic speech. She saw everything in black and white and her speech was as usual unwavering. “We have no other choice...we cannot shirk this simple decision: either rationing immigration or rationing food and clothing ... that is all that is required of us, less lawlessness, in order to not waste the assets for which our loved ones died. They did not die for prosperity but for the state and for massive immigration”.<sup>2</sup>

The response of most Israelis to austerity was basically negative. If Ben-Gurion and Dov Yossef, the minister of Supplies and Rationing, expected that Israelis would behave like the British people behaved during World War II, which both of them witnessed during the 1940 Blitz in London, they were totally wrong. Israelis and especially new immigrants were not prepared to adopt austerity. The latter claimed they did not come to Israel to suffer, because suffering was their lot in their countries of origin. The Holocaust survivors did not want to suffer again. They had already undergone horrors and hunger. The veteran Israelis too were not enchanted. They had spent long years of pioneering, poverty and occasional hunger, the struggle against the British and war against the Arabs. Now they wanted normality. The establishment of an austerity regime overseen by an army of inspectors and officials contributed to giving Israel the image of an Eastern European People’s Republic governed by visionless bureaucrats. But in those

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<sup>2</sup> Address in the Knesset, 7 August 1950, quoted in Tom Segev, 1949 –The First Israelis, Jerusalem, 1984, p. 23.

days this way of life was acceptable to Mapai. On May 1, 1949, Golda marched in May Day parade in Tel Aviv, for the first time in the independent State of Israel, and proclaimed: “Socialism in Our Time”. She truly believed in this but the dream collided with the harsh reality. A month later she had to travel to the paragon of capitalism, the United States, to seek contributions from American Jews in order to help absorb the immigrants. In America she made sure not to repeat her May Day slogan. But the damage was done. Potential investors were repelled and deterred. Even if the reality fit Mapai’s ideology which did not want to share power with private capital, a new and interesting situation developed: contributions—yes, investments—no. Reality dictated a central direction of the economy of Israel and that fit Mapai’s thinking and policies. It certainly fit Mapam’s pro-Soviet ideology. However, the trouble was that the direction of the economy was implemented by narrow-minded bureaucrats who lacked experience in running a modern economy and were guided by purely political considerations. “What is good for Mapai is good for the state”, was their belief. Naturally it was obvious that the government would give preference to the Histadrut’s industries with Solel Boneh at the top as well as other bodies of the Workers Association. Golda retained fond sentiments for Solel Boneh from the days she worked there in the 1920’s, and this corporation won many contracts for the construction of housing for new immigrants and veteran Israelis alike. Mapai ruled Israel by a system of guided democracy, in which her activists and emissaries taught the newcomers how to live in Israel. As long as Mapai had a well-thought-out ideology and a very strong and united leadership, this was possible. But when the leadership became weaker and the sense of direction was lost, the new immigrants soon found another leader and another ideology—Menachem Begin and the nationalist populism of Herut.

Whatever the merits of the system, in 1950 the government of Israel lacked the means to fund immigration, absorption, housing, employment and security simultaneously. Israel’s economy almost collapsed under the heavy burden of these tasks. The government could not turn to the Israeli tax payer, partly because the country was poor and partly because there was not yet an efficient tax collecting agency. It was evident that they would have to turn to American Jews who had financed much of the costs of the War of Independence and would now be called upon to fund the historic task of the ingathering of the exiles. Golda was sent to the United States a number of times to raise funds through the United Jewish Appeal. But as in the past, she was unhappy over the need to share the funds with local Jewish communal needs and knew very well that the United Jewish Appeal was headed by professional fundraisers who spoke of “tsdaka” and “gmilit hassadim”, both terms denoting charity, whereas she stressed partnership and participation in the great historic enterprise of the construction of

the Jewish state and taking part in the greatest event of the Jewish people in modern times—the establishment of its sovereign nation. She argued simply that “prolonged dependency on philanthropy runs counter to the basic tenet of Zionism—that of self-reliance and own work, not to mention national independence”. She and her colleagues began to seek additional financial resources that would not have to be shared with local American Jewish bodies but would be wholly channelled to Israel.

At the beginning of 1950, discussions were held in New York and Jerusalem focusing on the creation of an additional financial tool. The discussions were attended by Ben-Gurion, Kaplan, Golda and Henry Montor, the one who arranged her historic fundraising trips in 1948. Golda and Montor became very close friends, and even though he was the executive vice president of the United Jewish Appeal, she convinced him of the need to seek new ways to raise funds. In September 1950, a conference was held in Jerusalem in which Ben-Gurion proposed that in addition to making their normal contributions to the United Jewish Appeal, American Jews would also help Israel by purchasing State of Israel Development Bonds which would provide the huge capital necessary to the development of the country’s infrastructure. The United Jewish Appeal professionals opposed the idea. It would hurt the appeal and harm the tax deduction given to contributions for overseas charitable, welfare, health and education needs. Finally Henry Morgenthau was able to obtain the approval of the American Treasury for the sale of Israel Bonds. In October 1950, Golda traveled to Washington to attend the National Planning Conference for Israel and demand of the 100 delegates the approval of a three-year-plan for the development of Israel. The sum she mentioned was 15 billion dollars over the next 15 years. Israeli tax payers would foot a third and American Jews two thirds. The plan was approved only after Golda made a commitment that the only guarantees she could offer on behalf of the Government of Israel were “the Israeli people, the hundreds of thousands of Jews who continue to come to Israel and tens of thousands of people living in tents. But I can also offer you our children, the children of veteran Israelis and those of Yemenites and Iraqis and little Romanian children growing up, in Israel—proud and secure Jews, with self-respect. They will repay this loan and their word of honor will be to pay it with interest”.<sup>3</sup> In May 1951, Ben-Gurion launched the Israel Bonds campaign in an exhausting trip across America. Standing by his side was Golda Meir. During its early years, Israel Bonds sold some 65 million dollars worth of Bonds. Since then, Israel Bonds raised billions of dollars for Israel. Henry Montor was appointed the executive vice president and chief executive officer of the Bonds.

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<sup>3</sup> Meir, *My Life*, p. 197; for the establishment of Israel Bonds, see Urofsky, *We Are One*, pp. 200–201.



The flow of contributions from America was a sort of compensation for the lack of immigration from there. Of the total number of immigrants who arrived in Israel in its first five years, only 0.6% came from North America. This was a major disappointment to Israel's leaders. A situation was created in which American Jews, mostly Ashkenazi, were helping the Israeli authorities, the majority of whom were Ashkenazi as well, to absorb not only Ashkenazi immigrants from Europe but a growing number of Mizrachim—immigrants from Moslem countries in North Africa and the Middle East. Israel's leadership, all of whom came from Eastern Europe, found it virtually impossible emotionally to deal with the mass immigration from Arab countries. It was easier for them to deal with the immigration of European Jews with many of whom they at least had a common language—Yiddish, and similar background. Tensions with immigrants from Arab countries were created from almost day one of their arrival. The absorbers tried to remake the younger generation of these new immigrants into Sabras—Palestine-born Jews – and fast. There was no time. In the IDF, which became the most important melting pot in the country, a bizarre situation was created: the officers were native Israelis while the soldiers were predominantly new immigrants. Golda had enough sense to realize that a struggle was developing between two cultures that would slowly lead to the creation of two societies alienated from each other. As early as July 1950, she declared:

The reality that is developing in Israel, and let us state this openly and honestly, the reality is that two separate states are being created among the Jews living in this country. The first, let us call it the veterans, and the second, let us call it the new immigrants. And there is a chasm between these two nations. It is impossible to bridge this abyss through social work, as good as it may be, loyal and dedicated. The question is: are we headed towards the disappearance or at least the narrowing of the gap? My answer is, and I am deeply convinced of that, is that we are moving in the opposite direction.<sup>4</sup>

What she was speaking of became known as “First Israel” and “Second Israel”. In the early 1950's, Israel confronted a difficult dilemma: what should be the focus—the quality of absorption or the pace of this process. Once it became clear that there would be no selective immigration, the only way was to absorb the new immigrants as fast as possible and by all means available and turn them to productive citizens. Two years after they were built, it was clear that the maabarot would have to be eliminated even at the cost of creating city slums and building development towns in the periphery inhabited almost exclusively by new immigrants. They would have to deal with their many problems in these remote places

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<sup>4</sup> “We Must Close the Gap”, address in the Knesset, 25 July 1950, quoted in Syrkin, ed., *Golda Meir Speaks Out*, pp. 80–81.

by themselves, alienated from the veteran Israelis. The development towns and the new moshavim that were established throughout Israel were also a partial answer to the need to disperse the population and to settle the areas closer to the Armistice Demarcation Lines that were porous to the infiltration of Arabs. In this way the new immigrants became dependent on their absorbers who supplied them with housing, jobs, education and loans to start their own businesses. The absorbers, mainly Mapai and Hapoel Hamizrachi activists, expected that in due course the new immigrants would repay them on election day. Indeed, in the early years, the new immigrants that began to integrate into the existing Israeli political system that they encountered awarded their votes mainly to Mapai. For them that party was the incarnation of Israel, they voted for Ben-Gurion, the new messiah, and for his party that disbursed the goods. This integration process enabled Israel to go through its first years without political upheaval and in reasonable stability. However, in this process, what determined one's social and economic status was usually his country of origin, and this was the basis for the creation of the two Israels. Golda understood what was happening but was powerless to prevent this situation. The effort she led was heroic and was never attempted in any other country. It was evident that mistakes would be committed and they were. A generation later Mapai would pay a heavy price for those errors and would lose its hegemony.

In those days, Golda developed her own working habits. She did not like to work in her office and preferred to go out to the field with her aides, so see things first-hand—as harsh as they might be. On occasion she was met by demonstrations and protests. One day she traveled with Marie Syrkin, her biographer, to visit an immigrant town. In a new house she entered into an argument with a family from Eastern Europe who complained bitterly. It appeared that this couple had immigrated to Israel from Poland not because they were Zionists, but because they were scared to remain there. As they left the house, Golda muttered: “Not one word of gratitude”.<sup>5</sup> In the future she would utter other words that were often taken out of context, among them describing the Black Panthers as “they are not nice”.

Usually in her travels she was greeted with flowers and cakes and was happy to dispense advice to young mothers on how to bathe their babies, how to cook and run a home. Few believed that twenty-five years earlier the minister of labor and construction had been living in Jerusalem on the verge of poverty. Since she was always enthused about those things she thought mattered, she was able to instill in her associates a sense of joy of creation, of laying the foundations of the

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<sup>5</sup> Syrkin, *Woman with a Cause*, p. 264.

new nation. In this manner she was able to draw from them the best they could give. She did not suppress new ideas as she would do later in the Foreign Ministry and the Prime Minister's Office, but encouraged creative thinking. She was open to new ideas and new experiments. As usual, she always tried to demonstrate that she could handle her job well. She may have feared that if she failed, this office would be taken away from her and she would be moved to being deputy prime minister or an ordinary Knesset member.

During the days when she was not traveling around the country, she held regular meetings with her senior aides, while also consulting lower ranks, and sought information wherever she could get it. During her years in the Ministry of Labor, she demonstrated her talent of selecting the best and the brightest assistants who were loyal not only to her personally but also to her ideology. They were all members of Mapai, but that was not the only criterion for their selection. She wanted doers, people she could rely upon and not have to constantly check on their performance. The director generals of the ministry were Zvi Berenson and Yitzhak Eilam, the legal counsel was Zvi Bar-Niv, National Insurance was planned by Yitzhak Kanav and Giora Lotan who also headed this institute in its early years. The discussions were usually brief and to the point and she sought to reach practical conclusions. Her speeches, including those in the Knesset, were written by others, mostly by her spokesman Zalman Chen and the legal adviser Zvi Bar-Niv. Once a year, she had to address the Knesset when she presented her ministry's budget. Those were the days of mass unemployment with some 30,000 seeking work, there were violent demonstrations for "bread and work" and many instances of violence in the labor exchanges. When writing her speech for the Knesset on this painful subject, her spokesman inserted in the speech sayings taken from the party's elders and other luminaries to strengthen her argument. She refused, saying: "This is not for me. Do you think anyone will believe me? You think that with these sayings I will impress anyone. This is not me. I am not known for my learning. Please give me only the facts and the figures".<sup>6</sup> One of the senior officials, Lionel Watson, who had been Haifa city engineer during the Mandate, remained in Israel and worked in the Public Works Department, praised the atmosphere, the comradeship and the mutual assistance that prevailed in the office under Golda's inspiration.<sup>7</sup> The team was happy, there was little competition and she made it a rule to involve many of her staff in the decision-making process. Unlike the Foreign Ministry and the Prime Minister's Office, where she preferred small forums, mainly because of her pathological fear of leaks to the

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<sup>6</sup> Tamir, ed., Golda, p. 83.

<sup>7</sup> Moshe Sharett, Political Diary, Tel Aviv, 1968–1971, p. 123 (henceforth referred to as Sharett Diary).

media, here she involved many. Leaks about housing and employment did not bother her. In any case, the media was not interested in these stories. Leaks on foreign and defense matters were far more exciting. But above all, apart from some Treasury officials, the other ministries did not interfere in her ministry's work and she was able to implement some of her goals.

The budget was still at the top of the agenda in 1950. In that year, the Government of Israel was able to obtain a loan from the United States and American Jews that funded some 40% of the budget. In 1951, small sums began to arrive from the sale of Israel Bonds. But this was a drop in the bucket. The same year, discussions were held on a new source of funds, which caused a huge emotional explosion—German Reparations. On November 28, 1950, Mapai's leadership met to discuss Ben-Gurion's proposal to enter into direct negotiations with the Federal Republic of Germany. Golda said yes to the negotiations, "but this does not mean forgiveness. It must be made clear that what we are demanding is rightfully ours and that we are not making up with the Germans".<sup>8</sup> In the discussion in Mapai's Central Committee she said that even irrational responses had their place: "since when have the Zionist Movement and ourselves raised the flag of rationality?" She was also aware of national honor considerations and rejected any humane attitude towards the Germans. She could not for a moment think of an Israeli representative entering into a conversation with a German and extend his hand to him; sitting with Germans around the same table she thought was permissible, "but only as victors over the vanquished".<sup>9</sup>

The protocols of the discussions in the cabinet on German Reparations that were published in 2007 clearly show the change in her views on this critical issue. In a cabinet meeting on January 3, 1951, she argued that "it was inconceivable that a delegation of the Government of Israel will travel and sit in a German Government office and negotiate with someone from the German Government". She preferred that the negotiations with Germany be held through the four occupying powers. Her position softened in the course of 1951 and on October 28, 1951, she said that before they entered into negotiations, it must be understood that we could not and should not give up that which was due to the Jewish people, but was difficult to understand that there were Jews who recoiled from the very idea of contact with Germans. As far as she was concerned, a German was a German. On December 13, 1951, she admitted to the Mapai Central Committee that she had a clear racist attitude. "For me each German is a-priori

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<sup>8</sup> Michael Brecher, *Foreign Policy System of Israel, Settings, Images, Process*, New Haven, 1972, pp. 82–83.

<sup>9</sup> Shafir, *Extended Hand*, p. 81; Discussion in Mapai Central Committee, 13 December 1951.

a Nazi. Later I am prepared to check and see if he is a righteous man...I want to say what I am afraid of... I am afraid of two things: First that we may not succeed. If I knew that negotiations with Germans and receipt of the reparations could create a mood of amnesia or forgiveness, I would say, whatever happens, this is not permissible". She was also afraid of who would negotiate and of the question whether they would shake hands: this is not a friendly get together, he would come as a representative of a people third of which third of which were slaughtered by the people whose representatives he faced. Her conclusion was not to run there excitedly, that could distort the entire issue, which they did not intend to do. Finally she voted in that body for embarking on negotiations with Germany. It can be safely assumed that economic considerations changed her mind. She also voted in favor of negotiations in the cabinet. In the critical Knesset debate on January 8, 1952, several hours after Begin's Herut party demonstrated outside the Knesset and stones were thrown at the building, she said that the reparations were intended to enable Israel to become stronger in any way to rescue as many Jews as necessary. The reparations were meant to ensure all means to strengthen Israel's power in whatever form and shape it took and there was nothing holier, nothing more Jewish and nothing more patriotic than this commandment. Israel was going to demand what was due to it. The motion to enter into negotiations with Germany was adopted by 61 against 50. In a cabinet meeting on September 4, 1952, on the eve of the signing of the Reparations Agreement, it was clear that Israel would send a large purchasing mission to Germany to select the goods included in the agreement. Golda proposed that the delegation travel without children, "Israeli children will not live in Germany, will not attend German schools, will not play with German children". Yet she was pleased that Israel was able to gain some 820 million dollars in the state-to-state Reparations Agreement.

Years later she told an interviewer that the reasons that led her to support the reparations were the security needs, development and the dire economic situation of Israel as well as the chance to obtain an international recognition of the organic link between the State of Israel and the Jewish People anywhere in the world and the fact that Israel must represent the Jewish People in this matter. This was the first time a major power recognized the Jews as a nation and was willing to negotiate with a Jewish state. She admitted that at the time she knew fully well how shaky Israel's economy was and how isolated it was in the international community.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Brecher, *Foreign Policy System of Israel*, p. 69. See also Address in the Knesset, 8 January 1952.

In 1953, there were first indications that the economy was improving somewhat. The ministry of labor and housing began to construct new two- to three-room apartments instead of the smaller standard one- to two-rooms housing, and here too the time element was vital. The aim was to give the new immigrants a sense of permanency and encourage them to put down roots in a certain place where they would live and raise their families. Parallel to this, the Minister of Commerce and Industry Pinchas Sapir started to create the industrial infrastructure to provide employment for the new immigrants. The government granted large subsidies to entrepreneurs willing to establish factories in development towns to employ people with no professional skills. The textile plants built did not require much skill. There was also the German Reparations Agreement which specified that Germany would supply Israel for the next ten years with goods and means of production worth 820 million dollars, in addition to personal restitutions to victims of the Nazi regime. Beginning in 1954, there arrived in Israel ships, rolling stock, machines, industrial raw materials and even some oil. The wheel began to turn and it appeared that Israel might be able to overcome the most pressing problems in her economic growth. In 1953, the immigration figures declined and for the first time there were more people leaving the country than arriving. The nations of Eastern Europe were now sealed to the exit of Jews and those remaining there became targets of persecution. There was virtually no immigration from America. There was a tiny trickle of immigrants from Western Europe and Latin America. The main effort was turned to North Africa, where several hundreds of thousands Jews still lived in Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia, then still under French rule. The vast building effort of the early years continued, but at a slower pace. The enormous pressures of the early years abated somewhat and Israel could begin to breathe easier.

If the early years were noted by much improvisation in the work of the ministry of labor and housing, mainly in construction of housing and roads, professional training and the other matters under its jurisdiction, in one sphere Golda acted according to a well-thought-out plan and order of priorities: social legislation. Here her long-time experience in the Histadrut and her sterile contacts with the Mandatory regime that paid scant attention to such matters paid off. As soon as she returned from Moscow, she established an interministerial committee to prepare the foundations of social legislation, mainly social security. This was clearly in line with the ideology of Mapai. Such laws would also place Israel among the most developed countries in the world, to which she wanted to be compared, but could never compete with on human, economic and financial resources. The committee was appointed in spite of the attempts by Finance Minister Kaplan and later Eshkol to torpedo it for a simple reason—lack of funds. Golda now came out vehemently against the position of her colleagues who

wanted to postpone the vision of the messianic age to more quiet times. The finance minister claimed that his till was empty and he could not underwrite the vast outlay of social security. The plan called for work-related accidents insurance, old age pensions, maternity grants, and various grants to widows, orphans, invalids and even burial costs. There was need to pay reserve soldiers when called to their annual duty. To placate the Finance Ministry, Golda proposed the creation of an independent body to be called the National Insurance Institution, whose income would derive from workers' contributions, from employers and from the government. The Finance Ministry's opposition was such that Golda presented the draft law to the Knesset without ensuring the government's participation in the proposed law. The law was presented for its first reading in the Knesset on February 5, 1952. Deeply moved, Golda, who felt she was making history, read the following words:

I deem it a great honor to present on behalf of the government the National Insurance Law -1952. The day in which any legislature in the world opens its discussion on the social security bill—is a great event in the life of any country. I allow myself to say that this event is seven times bigger in our young nation, and it is a great privilege for the Knesset, that already in the fourth year of our independence it moves to deal with the first in a series of social security legislation.

The quest for orderly social life has marked the Hebrew nation from the beginning of its appearance on the stage of history, and the fervor of its prophets for the sake of the poor and widows put its mark on the development of human society.

The founders of Zionism, headed by Israel's visionary Benjamin Zeev Herzl, and those who laid the foundations for the state in this country, have linked our political independence with the principles of social justice.

At the beginning of the workers' movement in this country rested the principle of mutual aid and the concern for the weak. This became the basic foundation of the Histadrut. During the long period of the old Mandatory regime that ignored the basic needs of the Yishuv, the Histadrut built a network of mutual aid institutions: the Sick Fund, Invalids Fund, Unemployment Fund, "Dor Ledor", "Matsiv" and others. The settlements—the Kibbutz and the Moshav—perfected this sphere, where each individual knew absolute social security given to him by the society in which he lived and to which he devoted all his powers. There were other bodies, of workers and non-workers alike, that established over time health care and other institutions that looked after their members. Yet by adopting this law we are moving from a voluntary framework to a binding one. Happy are we who are fortunate to be members of the Knesset of Israel and fortunate is the Knesset that sees the need to enact this law even at a time when our country is beset with many and difficult problems.

We do not ignore the current problems when we turn to implement social security. The state is still in the early phases of its development and building. It is burdened with security and the integration of the mass immigration costs. It is struggling with growing economic hardships. All this did not escape our eyes when we planned the future social security and

while drafting the first law. Due to the present conditions, we are forced to implement the full plan not at once, but in stages. We also had to avoid at this stage adding a huge burden on the state's treasury.<sup>11</sup>

A year later, when Levi Eshkol was finance minister, the government entered into partnership with the Social Insurance Institute. This was one of the greatest achievements of Golda in her long political career. Like Ben-Gurion, who insisted on nonselective mass immigration and won, she too overcame doubts and uncertainties and insisted on the passage of this basic law during the fourth year of poor Israel. She refused to delay it to better times. Perhaps she feared that in the future the enthusiasm of some of her party colleagues would wane. She may have suspected that the young economists, who would soon be known as the “Treasury Boys”, would succeed in postponing this law or perhaps she feared that one day, when her party would no longer be in power, a right-wing party would not want to enact this law. For some reason, Israelis do not link Golda with this law. If Israelis ever thought of giving a name to laws, surely it would be known as “Golda's Law”. Of that time people remember “Golda's Roads” that led to development towns in the periphery, but few give her credit for her legislative efforts. In September 1949, the legislative plans of the Labor Ministry included Reserve Soldiers Payment Law, Return to Work of Demobilized Soldiers Law (1949), the law banning night baking (1951), Work and Rest Hours Law (1951), Youth Work Law (1953), Women's Work Law (1952), Apprenticeship Law (1953), Annual Paid Vacation Law (1951). Two laws over which she worked hard were enacted in 1957: Labor Disputes Settlement Law and the Collective Agreement Law. Laws dealing with the inspection of the work place, labor exchange, equal payment, severance pay and the trade union bill, were all adopted after she left the labor ministry, all the rest were adopted while she was still labor minister. The national health care law was not enacted because of the opposition of the Histadrut which did not always support her legislation, fearing that if the state took over these fields, the Histadrut would lose much of the influence it had acquired during the Mandate era. The Histadrut also did not like the ministry taking over vocational training and the idea that employers pay their share of pensions directly to the social insurance and not through the various Histadrut pension funds. For the same reason the Histadrut opposed the collection of sick fund payments through social security, a step likely to put an end to duplication and waste in the Histadrut's collection mechanisms. Over time, the Histadrut had to yield to the state on these matters.

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<sup>11</sup> Address in the Knesset, 5 February 1952.



In spite of the zeal with which Golda promoted her social legislation, she rightfully feared that eventually these laws would harm her party. The transfer of authority from the party, which was the norm in the 1930's and 1940's, to the hands of the government, was bound to reduce the party's influence. This was the Ben-Gurion concept of statism. He argued that once the state was created, it must establish a system of governmental functions and determine its actions with no direct linkage to party or movement frameworks that had been voluntary in the past. "His state concept saw the legitimacy of the government totally unrelated to public factors that make them their political subjects".<sup>12</sup> On behalf of interest of state (*raison d'état*), Ben-Gurion demanded and achieved the disbanding of the separate pre-state military frameworks: the Irgun, Lechi and the separate Palmach headquarters, and enacted State Security Service Law. The Free and Compulsory Education Law removed education from the various parties but left intact the independent education system of the ultra-orthodox Agudat Israel party, the same way it allowed yeshiva students not to serve in the army and also absolved religious women from military service, something that Golda vehemently opposed. In this way the Labor movement lost its education system. Labor Exchange Law took the role of providing employment away from the parties. The Social Insurance Law awarded the state the central function of dealing with the aged, handicapped and the weaker segments of society. Ben-Gurion also insisted on the establishment of a Civil Service Commission to determine clear-cut guidelines for the hiring of workers for the public sector. All these laws that are self evident in modern countries weakened Mapai, and that became one of the points of conflict between Ben-Gurion's heirs. His opponents viewed with growing alarm the dismantling of hallowed frameworks that they felt only strengthened the party's influence among various strata in the Yishuv. For his part, the "old man" argued that it was the state that had to provide these important services and not political parties. Since the Herut party or the General Zionists had never provided these services during the Mandate, Ben-Gurion's moves were not seen by them as weakening their authority in any way. On the contrary, they supported many of these laws.

One issue in which Golda was less successful was finding employment and preventing mass unemployment. The unemployed were mainly new immigrants, old, sick and lacking education and skills. It was necessary to employ them in order to give them a sense of respect in their own eyes and those of their families in addition to providing a minimal livelihood. Part of the cultural shock that the new immigrants encountered was the need to adjust to new and permanent

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<sup>12</sup> Horowitz and Lissak, *From Yishuv to Statehood*, p. 279.

working habits. The Holocaust survivors had not led a normal, productive life for at least ten years. Jews who came from African and Asian countries were mostly peddlers, and small artisans or the owners of small shops. For some of them, physical labor was demeaning. Golda was convinced there was dire need to train them to work, any work was better than doing nothing. She remembered from her days in America in the early 1930's the various relief work schemes adopted by Roosevelt's New Deal to employ millions of people who were out of work, derisively called "leaf raking". "What's wrong with paving roads, planting trees, readying the land and building homes", she asked. Most of the new immigrants adamantly refused to join the kibbutzim who in turn became increasingly alienated from the immigrants, many of whom lived not far from them in dire conditions, while they enjoyed order, cleanliness, employment, regular food and even vacations. Compared to the kibbutzim, the maabarot were hotbeds of poverty.

One of the major problems of the new immigrants was lack of authoritative and recognized leadership. They arrived in Israel leaderless. Those who were educated and successful in their profession or, in some cases, even prosperous, moved to other countries—France, Canada, to the United States and even to faraway Australia. A few went to Britain and some even to remote Latin American countries where some of them amassed wealth. A tiny minority moved to Switzerland. Many did well in business, banking and even in academia. There was a prevailing sense that Israel was the home of those who did not do well. The vacuum created by the absence of leadership was filled by Mapai, usually ignoring the immigrant's needs and sensibilities. Over time a new leadership was bound to grow in the development towns, some of whom gravitated to Herut. The second generation of immigrants repaid those who absorbed them by abandoning Mapai. This was evident and even predictable. But these processes would only come to fruition in the late 1970's.

The harsh reality raised severe ideological problems. On the one hand, Mapai's leaders had the vision of building a just and equal society. Israel would implement that which the Soviet Union had failed to do. It would be a truly socialist-democratic state, naturally under Mapai's leadership, whose heads spread slogans in public meetings and on May Day parades. But they were realistic enough to realize that Israeli socialism could not be built on the basis of hollow slogans. There was need to find accommodation and compromise and ensure continued support of American Jews for their brethren in Israel. In order to achieve this, they would have to conceal the socialist aspect of their ideology. Few believed that Israel will remain in a state of constant war and that the much-wanted immigration would create unexpected problems in all aspects of life. What to do? In 1951, Golda addressed a meeting of workers' councils and said:

I want to know how an immigrant family from Yemen will find a roof over its head. We sang songs and wrote articles, and made ardent speeches on immigrant absorption. But I want to know how a Yemenite family will advance to a home and the minimum necessary for existence. In which way this poor and small country, after a war and without peace, the massive immigration wave, will find the vast treasures to ensure housing and food and clothing and all that is necessary, including refrigerators, and implement the first commandment, for whose sake only it was worth creating a state—without them I do not need it. A Jewish state that will ensure a high standard of living, without massive unlimited immigration—I publically confess, I do not need such a state. I need a Hebrew state for one thing only, so that when Jews will want to come, and they will come—the gates of Israel will be open with no limitations, and if there is need to suffer for this holy thing, then let us all suffer and let us not create two nations among us.<sup>13</sup>

In spite of the problems and hardships, this was Mapai's finest hour. Asher Arian, an expert in Israeli politics, noted that

in the early years following the establishment of the state, Mapai was a perfect example of a dominant party...it won the largest number of votes, stood at the center of every coalition government, flew the flag of social needs and expressed the desires of society as a whole. It also enjoyed the enormous political advantages of a unified and crystallized leadership, of an elastic and broad-based, well-oiled political organization, of the absence of a serious political opposition and controlled vast economic and human resources that poured into Israel. It was hard to compete with such a combination and it took 30 years to defeat it.

Mapai controlled the key government ministries: prime minister, finance, defense, foreign affairs, education and labor, and left their junior coalition partners welfare, health, agriculture, police, religious affairs, tourism, interior, posts and justice.

Golda was now among the top and senior leaders. She won much respect for the manner in which she organized and arranged matters in various ways that included bursting into the office of the finance minister to demand additional budgets. Her ability to improvise was highly impressive in those days of creation, while they were the targets of derision when she was prime minister. Her unquestioning loyalty to the leaders was well known. In addition to her work in Israel she headed the Israel delegation to the annual meetings of the International Labor Organization in Geneva and at least twice a year traveled to America on behalf of the United Jewish Appeal or Israel Bonds. Every major leader who visited Israel met Golda. Since she never kept a diary, we find in Sharett's diaries many references to her numerous activities. She was a regular guest in meetings with foreign guests, partly because of her command of English, partly because she was highly persuasive and was possibly one of the best and most convincing spokespersons

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<sup>13</sup> Tamir, ed., Golda, p. 134.

of Israel. She could discuss domestic and foreign issues, security and immigrant absorption, housing and education. She was a well-known figure on Israel's roads, in the maabarot, moshavim and development towns. She won the loyalty and appreciation of her staff, they in turn always defended their minister, and she awarded them with job security and promotion. She knew in detail how her office functioned. Each job appointment required her approval. But the Ministry of Labor never became her political base, as the Office of the Prime Minister and Defense Ministry became the political base of Ben-Gurion, the Treasury of Eshkol. Her colleagues in the cabinet often consulted her on foreign and defense matters and her opinion was highly valued and usually accepted.

Although she was a very busy minister of labor, she regularly attended meetings that dealt with key foreign affairs and defense issues. Both Sharett and even Ben-Gurion sought her advice. Often she was asked to travel abroad and explain Israel's policies. In 1953, after the "Doctors Plot" canard exploded following Stalin's death, she was asked by Sharett to address the United Nations Security Council. He assumed that her experience as Israel's envoy to Moscow would give her speech greater credibility. Both the United Jewish Appeal and Israel Bonds constantly asked her to help raise funds, and all this meant prolonged absences from Israel. Luckily, her staff enabled her to travel overseas, knowing they would deal with every problem in a judicious manner, and she gave them much latitude and full backing, mainly from attacks launched at them by the heads of the Histadrut.

In December 1949, Golda participated in one of Israel's most crucial decisions. On December 9, 1949, the United Nations General Assembly renewed its call for the internationalization of Jerusalem and making it a *corpus separatum* as specified in the 1947 partition plan. To prevent this, Ben-Gurion proposed to the cabinet to move the Knesset from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, effectively making it Israel's capital. His suggestion was adopted. Sharett, then in New York, opposed this move and even tended his resignation but was soon persuaded to retract it. Golda supported Ben-Gurion when Mapai's Knesset faction discussed the issue in two long sessions. Those opposed to this move feared adverse United Nations and negative international reaction, while those in favor spoke of the holiness of the city to Judaism as well as its strategic importance. They argued that the Christian world that ignored the Jordanian shelling of the city and was prepared to let Jewish Jerusalem starve to death in 1948, had no moral right to demand the internationalization of the city. Later Golda admitted: "My feeling throughout these discussions was one of permanent fear. I always feared that if we do not decide like this—things will be worse".<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Brecher, *Foreign Policy System of Israel*, p. 222.

On one issue she did not always have a balanced and serious view, that of the budget. In spite of being a highly pragmatic politician, she often ignored the principle of a balanced budget. She argued that at the time of Sturm und Drang, the time of mass immigration and the creation of the state's foundations, budgetary considerations must not be allowed to interfere with the tasks that had their own dynamics. In a debate on unemployment she stated:

In recent months I did not hear from any of our respectable economists saying they regret the days in which Jews sat in camps idling, sinking. But I hear many expressions of regret over the waste of money, lack of efficiency and the huge cost of removing these people from there and putting them to work. What should be regretted here? Should we regret that Jews from Yemen, Jews from Iraq, Jews from Morocco and from Tunis did not know how to work, were not used to work and later they became used to work.

Few noted that she only mentioned oriental Jews. As for money, she assumed that at the end it would be found, either in Israel or in America. This is how she was used to think and in this respect she never changed. When the vision collided with harsh budgetary considerations, the budget had to be bent and not the vision. If we had listened to the economists, she used to say, we would never have established the state of Israel.

In May 1951, while in the United States for the launch of the Bond campaign by Ben-Gurion, Golda was called back to Israel. Morris Meyerson suffered a stroke and died all alone in her apartment in Tel Aviv. She rushed back with her son Menachem. Although they had lived apart for many years and while Morris remained unknown and she had become a minister in the government of Israel, yet he was her husband and the father of her children. For her he made huge sacrifices—he followed her to Palestine and stayed there even after his marriage foundered. She had genuine positive feelings towards him. Another blow, several weeks later, was the death of David Remez. Although in recent years they moved apart from each other and their relations were less warm than in the past, Remez signified for her the early and difficult years, the despair and the shattered dreams. He was the one to put her on the right track, tutored her, promoted her and launched her on the way to the top. She owed her political life to Remez. Another major figure from the past was gone. With the great leaders—Berl, Beilinson, Golomb, Dov Hoz and now Remez gone, there remained one—Ben-Gurion.

While she did not have direct access to the leader, she was one of the few who could see him whenever she wanted. But there was never much warmth and intimacy in their ties. He did not have the habit of easy conversation or any interest in small talk. He was to the point, brief, terse, occasionally short-tempered and had no time for idle chats. Years later Golda told a writer that she felt that Ben-Gurion did not really need anyone. Unlike Golda, he did not attend concerts

or the theater, and she did not read books on Greek philosophy or for that matter on other subjects. The conversations between them were on politics, foreign and defense matters, personnel and leadership problems in the party and on rare occasions about what had happened to the Zionist dream. She is mentioned often in his diaries, but he did not expand on her words or her contributions to the discussions, certainly not how she felt and or what was her mood. This would change in the early 1960's when Golda became involved in moves that led to his final resignation in June 1963. When Golda's mother died in 1952, Ben-Gurion wrote her a personal letter that moved her deeply: He wrote that a mother is the most intimate and unique thing and mentioned that he lost his mother when he was ten years old.

In the summer of 1951, there were several political crises, mainly on the issue of religious education. As a result of one of them, Ben-Gurion resigned and elections were held on July 30, 1951. This was Mapai's first major test after the beginning of mass immigration. Its leaders were mobilized to win votes. Golda, as always, participated with much enthusiasm in the campaign. She offered the public two options: the good life or mass immigration, meaning continued life of rationing and austerity. Israel was too weak to do both at the same time. Golda lashed out at Herut and the General Zionists who called for a policy based on private initiative. Where were the private initiators, why didn't they come, she asked. Why didn't they go to the Negev? In campaign meetings, she flayed her opponents mercilessly. The opposition was unable to present the voters with impressive figures on the national level while Mapai could. The left-wing opposition criticized the policy of leaning on America instead of pursuing a nonaligned policy. The right spoke of massive waste, the preference given to the workers' sector in all areas, from import licenses to public works tenders. The voter preferred to return Mapai to power, but did not give it an absolute majority. Mapai won 45 seats, Mapam—15, the Religious parties—15. Herut went down from 14 to 8, their votes having been taken by the General Zionists who won 20 seats. On October 7, 1951, Ben-Gurion presented his new cabinet which was once again a coalition between Mapai and the Religious parties and won the support of 56 Knesset members as against 40 opposed with four abstentions. This would be the last time Ben-Gurion would present a minority government. Golda continued as minister of labor, as there was no change in the manning of other senior positions.

In her ministry, the daily work continued in full speed. Attention was now paid to building elementary housing that were a dire necessity but were also an architectural and esthetic disaster. Each time she visited these houses, she had mixed feelings. She did understand the need for saving and speed, but her sense of esthetics was hurt by the ugly constructions that only stressed the social gap, that showed who was rich and who was poor, who was a newcomer and who was

a veteran. When she presented to the Knesset the plan to build 30,000 housing units, she made a commitment that the construction would take six months. At the end of August, she had to admit that only 15,000 units were ready. Declarations apart, finally only 18,000 units were built, half of them wooden huts. It was easier, cheaper and faster to build huts.<sup>15</sup> In an early Knesset debate on June 8, 1949, she explained her decision to house thousands of immigrants in tents and huts: “I am not a hero and I cannot say whether five, six or eight families will live in one room until a way will be found to build them a two-room apartment, because I knew this was an illusion. Such apartments will not be built that fast”. Reacting to criticism by a General Zionist member of the Knesset on the housing quality and speed, she answered in sarcasm that was typical of her when she was criticized: “I am simply full of envy of Knesset Member Serlin who can quietly criticize various shapes of housing. Huts should never be given to immigrants. Houses made of blocks—not good, unlivable. Mr. Serlin likes a good thing, and one must congratulate his esthetic sense. He likes a large and sturdy house”.<sup>16</sup> Later she explained her view of the need to crowd a family of three, or even four, in one room: “We intend to provide a roof. Not a ceiling but a roof, not of cement but gypsum. Over time the immigrant will himself do the ceiling, after several months will add a room, a balcony, and there is no danger in that”.<sup>17</sup> The problem was that the immigrants did not do so and those among them, especially the most needy, lacked a housing culture. Most of them expected that someone else would do the job for them. This was not done for many years and added to the feeling of shame and depression, not to mention the feeling of poverty, alienation and deprivation.

As noted, the great momentum was over by the end of 1953 when an effort was undertaken to eliminate the maabarot. Until Golda moved to the Foreign Ministry in June 1956, two thirds of the maabarot were eliminated, and 120,000 families were moved to permanent housing. During her stint as Minister of Labor and Construction 130,000 housing units were built and 400,000 people found gainful employment, 80,000 acquired a trade. In spite of these impressive achievements, not to mention the establishment of scores of kibbutzim and moshavim, Israeli historians did not favor the minister of labor and most of the successes were not credited to Golda. People remember to this day the maabarot, the tin huts, the tents and the blocks and Golda’s roads, the ugliness, the unemployment and the demonstrations. She could provide only what the budget enabled her to give. Ben-Gurion determined that there should be mass immigration. She believed in

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<sup>15</sup> Address in the Knesset, 8 August 1949.

<sup>16</sup> Address in the Knesset, 1 June 1949.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

it, but budgetary limitations did not permit this. She had to compromise, and each compromise became a policy. Many Jews were absorbed and integrated and became productive citizens. But they never forgot their sense of discrimination and turned their anger at those they thought were responsible for that. Mapai was proud of its achievements in immigration and absorption, but years later it paid the price for the many errors committed, most of them with the best of intentions. As for Golda, she resented their attitude: “They are ungrateful”, she said, “after all we have done for them”.

During her term as minister of labor, Golda often clashed with the heads of the Histadrut. Now she was on the other side of the barricade. Many years later, Ariel Sharon coined the phrase: “What you see from here, you do not see from there”. That applied to Golda’s relations with the Histadrut. She was opposed to their demands for higher wages, for their support of strikes in public services and for what she thought was their help for the better-off segments of the population. She was totally opposed to a nurses’ strike, saying she was waiting for the first nurse to break the strike and return to work. She opposed a strike by engineers and demanded greater equality in pay. She objected to various under-the-table arrangements designed to end strikes in essential services that were usually given to stronger unions and to powerful workers’ committees in the essential enterprises. In these issues she enjoyed Ben-Gurion’s full backing, although he never showed much interest in these matters.

Now, from early 1954, when the enormous tensions created by mass immigration, absorption and housing abated and the austerity regime petered out, it was possible to breathe easier and Golda could now turn her attention to another arena whose consequences were far more important for the future of both country and party, the internal party arena, which showed signs of cracking from within. From the end of 1953, her attention was increasingly diverted to what was happening within Mapai, to the question of Ben-Gurion’s successor and the future of Israel.



## 11 Ben-Gurion Commands (1953–1956)

While the members of the Third Aliyah who were so instrumental in establishing Israel entrenched themselves in positions of power, another group in Mapai consisting of younger people, began to emerge. They were graduates of the Labor Movement educational system and its youth movements, men who made their names in the Hagannah, acquisition of arms, the illegal immigration and the War of Independence. Some were born on kibbutzim, others on moshavim and a minority came from the large cities. They were all children of Eastern European Jews who came to Palestine on the eve of World War I and mainly during the first years of the Mandate. Members of this generation were divided into a number of groups. The first consisted of those who were alarmed over what they feared as the transformation of Israel into an Eastern European People's Democracy governed by a party and governmental bureaucracy, whose manifold apparatus stifled initiative and bound its citizens in a complex system of rules, regulations, edicts and statutes. The citizen was dependent on the bureaucracy and not the other way. These younger men, many Palmach and youth movements graduates, saw with growing concern the entrenchment of the veteran leaders, many of them without any charisma and unable to inspire the younger generation of Israel. True, the veterans achieved Israel's independence, but seemed to have lost the generation of those who were responsible for making independence a reality. Among the alienated were writers, poets, journalists and academics that distanced themselves from politics seen by them as full of intrigues and manipulations and enrolled at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. Some even left the country to study abroad. Many were upset over the removal from power of the Palmach commanders and the rise of a gray, uninspiring bureaucracy which characterized government offices in the early years of statehood.

The second group among the younger generation was determined to rise in the party and governmental hierarchy and thought itself capable of taking over from the veteran leaders. Some of these men understood that one way to achieve rapid advancement was through the defense establishment, either in its civilian branch—the Ministry of Defense, or its military branch—the Israel Defense Forces. In this way they would serve the state and deal with the main challenge—the safeguarding of Israel's existence. They would also be promoted due to their personal capabilities and talents and not just because of party membership and connections. In the defense establishment they would also be less exposed to criticism because the media in those times treated this establishment with kid gloves and avoided attacking it. This group tied its future and career to the founding father—David Ben-Gurion.

The young leaders began to talk of the need to democratize Mapai and demanded of the veteran leaders a spotless behavior when it came to jobs and promotions. The veteran leaders now found themselves serving as cabinet ministers, members of the Jewish Agency Executive and heading the Histadrut and its various enterprises. In the early 1950's, a new group calling itself the "Movement for Party Renewal" disturbed the veteran leaders who worried about the party's unity and wholeness, and of course their own position in the government and party hierarchy. "If the young leaders wish to have reforms, fine with us," they said, "let them go to the Negev and teach new immigrants how to become productive citizens." The young men began to display signs of growing impatience. They realized that if they have to wait their turn for room at the top, it could mean at least twenty years until biology would take its toll on their elders. They were not prepared for such a long wait. No wonder that Zalman Aranne once scoffed at them: "Being young is not an ideological program". The younger men showed much interest in running large organizations and less in ideology. Soon a gap developed between the "technocrats" or "doers" and the older "ideologists". The latter continued to float outdated slogans, with no bearing and message to the new native-born generation who had experienced the War of Independence, and certainly it held no message to the new immigrants who came in the mass immigration waves of the early 1950's.

The younger leaders sought and found their patron in Ben-Gurion. He admired the younger generation that was responsible for Israel's military victories of 1948 and had made the state a viable reality. He also understood the need for proper party hierarchy and realized that the veteran leaders knew how to win elections, but he had to prepare the future leadership of Israel, those who would move the country towards its goal as a progressive, modern technological-scientific and industrialized society able to defend itself by its own means. Ben-Gurion, more than any other leader, understood that in order to survive, Israel must build a modern army that depended on three foundations: the human factors, which meant immigration, absorption, education, leadership, motivation and professional cadres; an industry, based on science and modern technology, that would produce modern weapons for the IDF and agriculture to feed the country. This he saw as the implementation of classical Zionism and a solution to employment for new immigrants, dispersal of the population and the settlement of vast empty parts of Israel's periphery mainly along the exposed borders. Ben-Gurion busied himself with learning technological subjects and in the framework of his "statist" ideology he preferred that the military industries be developed by the defense ministry and not by other bodies such as the Histadrut's "Workers Association".

The younger leaders were impressed with Ben-Gurion's "statism" and his order of priorities. They were not that concerned if in the process of moving to

“statism” a number of sacred cows such as the workers’ educational stream, the party’s labor exchanges and the weakening of the Histadrut and maybe even that of the party were slaughtered, for them the price was not too high. Their power bases were the Prime Minister’s Office where Ehud Avriel, Teddy Kollek and Yitzhak Navon, Ben-Gurion’s secretary, were on the rise, and the Ministry of Defense where the star of Shimon Peres shone, and the IDF where Moshe Dayan rapidly rose in the ranks. These men and others had concrete ideas how to reform the administration of Israel, which would entail changes in the leadership. They expressed these views freely and caused much unrest among the middle ranks of the party leadership.

Some members of this group, among them Golda Meir, Zalman Aranne, Levi Eshkol, Pinchas Sapir and Pinchas Lavon who arrived in the Third Aliyah, were aware of this new grouping of Ben-Gurion’s lads. They hoped that Ben-Gurion would be able to rein in this group and channel their talents in the proper governmental and party institutions, and when the time comes, they would gain growing responsibility and more senior positions. But they were determined that the veterans would dictate the pace of the promotion. They would decide whom to reward and whom to remove. Golda and her colleagues had by that time ceased being revolutionaries and become conservatives preserving the existing order, stability, heritage and their own position. But they also knew that the younger men were not prepared to wait for ever. After all, Moshe Dayan commanded the Jerusalem area in the 1948 war and negotiated with King Abdullah, Peres headed the naval services in that war and led the arms purchasing mission in New York before he was 30. Avriel was the first Israeli ambassador to present his credentials after heading arms purchasing operations in Europe before and during the 1948 war. Teddy Kollek was in charge of arms purchasing in the United States and already served as minister in the Israeli embassy in Washington. Aharon Remez commanded the Israel Air Force and another young man, Shlomo Hillel, organized and led the massive immigration operation of Iraqi Jews.

Already then there was discussion of Ben-Gurion’s succession. He was at the pinnacle of his powers, but at 67 there was reason to consider the delicate question of who would succeed him when the time came. The veteran leaders assumed that when he decided to retire, he would nominate his successor and hand over power in an orderly manner. The younger leaders hoped that Ben-Gurion would not abandon them and even if he handed over the top positions to the older leaders, their status and influence will not diminish. Few were ready when Ben-Gurion announced to his startled colleagues on October 10, 1953, that he intended to resign as prime minister and defense minister and settle in a Negev kibbutz called Sede Boker. He claimed that he was tired of the supreme responsibility he had borne since 1935 when he was elected Chairman of the Jewish

Agency Executive. The time had come to rest, to let others to advance and to serve the nation. Maybe by going to the Negev desert, others would emulate his example and carry out real pioneering.

The veterans met in Golda's home the next day. Among them were Sharett, Aranne, Lavon, Eshkol, Dov Yosef and Peretz Naftali. They decided that it was unthinkable that Ben-Gurion be allowed to go to the Negev and threatened to resign en masse. They hoped that by presenting a unified front they would impress Ben-Gurion who had already taken leave of absence prior to his resignation.<sup>1</sup>

In the coming weeks, Israel would be hurled into two major crises. The first was an IDF raid on the West Bank village of Qibia on October 14, 1953, in retaliation for the murder of a Jewish family in the border settlement Yahud. In the Qibia raid, over 70 civilians were killed, mainly women and children. The appalled Sharett heard of this on Ramallah Radio. Ben-Gurion decided to hide the truth from the Israeli public and announced that no IDF unit had been missing from its base that night. He claimed the raid was carried out by angry Israeli civilians. The other crisis had focused on the Israeli works to broaden the River Jordan channel in the Hula Valley near the B'not Ya'acov Bridge in the demilitarized zone along the Israel-Syria Armistice Demarcation Line. Syria lodged a complaint with the UN Security Council that ordered suspension of the works. Israel refused to comply and the United States, in an unprecedented move, announced that it was suspending all economic aid to Israel. This was an extreme move. In a meeting of the Ministerial Defense Committee headed by Ben-Gurion, Golda vehemently opposed caving in to American dictates. But Ben-Gurion yielded. The works were halted and the American aid resumed three weeks later. The National Water Carrier plans were redrawn and the source of the water for the Negev would now be the Sea of Galilee (Lake Kinneret) instead of the Jordan River near the B'not Ya'acov Bridge. The veterans hoped that these events would cause Ben-Gurion to reconsider his resignation. But he insisted that a replacement be found for him in both capacities—as prime minister and defense minister. There were three likely candidates: Moshe Sharett, Levi Eshkol, and Golda Meir. On October 28, 1953, Sharett noted in his diary that Nahum Goldmann told him that Ben-Gurion wanted Golda to succeed him, but these were unsubstantiated rumors. Yet this

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<sup>1</sup> Sharett Diary, 11 October 1953, p. 26. This chapter is based primarily on the following: Moshe Sharett, *Personal Diary*, Tel Aviv, 1978; Louise Fisher, ed., *Moshe Sharett, Israel's Second Prime Minister—Selected Documents 1894–1965*, Jerusalem, 2007; Rosenthal, Yemima and others, eds., *David Ben-Gurion, Israel's First Prime Minister—Selected Documents*, Jerusalem, 1996; Bar-Zohar, *Ben-Gurion*; Goldstein, Eshkol; Yossi Goldstein, *Golda—A Biography*, Beer Sheba, 2012; Gavriel Sheffer, *Moshe Sharett—Biography of a Political Moderate*, Oxford, 1996.

was enough for Sharett to pour his heart out in his diary. On October 29, Golda appeared before an Israel Bonds mission and Sharett noted that her speech was devoid of any ideological content. He thought that her “basic” English flowed naturally but freed the audience from any intellectual effort. Ben-Gurion and Golda could not overcome the huge shock of their immigration to Israel, in opposition to their parents and unforgiving of those who did not follow them.<sup>2</sup>

Sharett’s views of Golda’s intellectual limitations were well known. But he was impressed with the strength of her personality and feared her candidacy even before any serious factor raised it. On November 11, the Mapai leadership met and while most speakers opposed Ben-Gurion’s determination to resign, Golda was the only one who defended his right to decide his own future.<sup>3</sup> There is no evidence that her candidacy was seriously considered. If it was, it can be assumed that she was persuaded by friends and family alike not to present her candidacy. They feared that in a vote she might lose and see it as a nonconfidence motion. Lavon was probably the only minister who considered her a likely successor to Ben-Gurion. Finally Ben-Gurion resolved the issue by nominating Sharett. Golda thought, even though she never voiced it publicly, that it was a poor selection and that Sharett would never be able to fill Ben-Gurion’s giant shoes since he was known for being cautious, moderate and of a wavering character. She also knew that Ben-Gurion was not retiring for good from politics or the Knesset, and that if worse came to worse, he could always be found in Sede Boker and help the Mapai leaders make decisions. Twenty years later she wrote in “My Life” that Sharett was sensitive to international public opinion, to the United Nations, to the stand of foreign governments and diplomatic niceties, whereas Israel’s basic needs at the time were how to ensure its very survival as a right and not as a gift from others.

Prior to resigning, Ben-Gurion made three appointments, one of which would prove disastrous. He appointed Pinchas Lavon as minister of defense. He promoted Peres to be Director General of the Defense Ministry at age 29, and Moshe Dayan, at 38, was promoted to Chief of Staff of the IDF. Dayan and Peres were Ben-Gurion protégées and loyalists and it was evident that they were meant to watch Lavon’s steps. In the midst of a cabinet session that discussed the approval of these appointments, Sharett sent a note to Golda: “Moshe Dayan is not a military personality and eschews discipline. He is a daring partisan, a fighter and statesman at war, and an adventurer in times of peace. He has no idea and no interest in how to run the military establishment”.<sup>4</sup> The cabinet approved the

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<sup>2</sup> Sharett Diary, 29 October 1953, p. 97.

<sup>3</sup> Discussion in Mapai Central Committee, 11 November 1953; Sharett Diary, p. 140.

<sup>4</sup> Sharett Diary, 29 October 1953, p. 202.

nominations and thus sealed the fate of the new defense minister. Lavon, who was seen as a dove, soon emerged as a hawk. He approved large-scale retaliatory raids, at times without consulting or even informing Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Sharett. Peres and Dayan were appalled. They began to question his judgment and ability. Golda described him as a complex handsome intellectual, who used to be a big dove, but now “became super hawk ever since he began to deal with military matters”.<sup>5</sup> She and some of her colleagues opposed his appointment but were not prepared to fight Ben-Gurion’s insistence. Lavon began to encounter growing suspicion not only from his ministerial colleagues but also from those under him, the Director General and the Chief of Staff. They objected to his demand to meet senior IDF officers without their presence and his repeated efforts to undermine their authority and status. Lavon, who opposed Ben-Gurion’s “statist” ideology, thought that the defense ministry had overexpanded its economic activities far beyond what was reasonable and thus hurt the industrial empire of the Histadrut. He thought that if some industries would be transferred from the defense ministry to the Histadrut, Mapai’s domination in Israel would be enhanced by dint of controlling these industries. His thinking did not differ from that of some of his colleagues, but times had changed, and what had been good during the Mandate was no longer valid. He had to struggle against Ben-Gurion who espoused a different doctrine.

In his attempt to limit the spheres of action of the Defense Ministry, Lavon encountered the growing opposition of Shimon Peres, himself an empire builder who expanded the country’s nascent arms and the aviation industries. The growing rift between them was not purely personal but also evolved on matters of principles. Peres supported the growing control of the defense ministry, while Lavon wanted to bolster the Histadrut. Dayan very much resented Lavon’s efforts to meet directly with members of the General Staff, and soon a situation was created which one observer called “disturbed hierarchies”,<sup>6</sup> as two sources of authority were created. The first was in Sede Boker, from where Ben-Gurion continued to consult with his colleagues, the second was the Prime Minister’s Office in Jerusalem, where Sharett sought to run the affairs of state honestly, with integrity and courage. The chain of command was vague, responsibility for issuing orders and overseeing their implementation was not always clear and above all there were attempts to undermine the credibility of the heads of the defense establishment. Lavon was blamed by Dayan and Peres of spreading lies

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5 Meir, *My Life*, p. 210.

6 Aluf Hareven, “Disturbed Hierarchies”, in *The Jerusalem Quarterly*, 9 (Fall 1978), Jerusalem, pp. 3–19.

and being emotionally unstable. Lavon retorted by charging these two with systematically undermining his authority. This was not the first time that Peres was charged with scheming against his political opponents.

Golda and her ministerial colleagues watched all this with growing trepidation. Since her confidence in Sharett's ability to lead the nation was limited, she was not surprised when Lavon began to hurt, humiliate, insult and bypass Sharett's authority. Orderly government deteriorated and this serious state of affairs in Israel, barely five years old, threatened the country's standing as a nation ruled by law with an orderly government. All this occurred when Israel was under mounting political, military and economic pressures. The land and sea siege was tightened and the number of attacks on her citizens and soldiers and violations of her sovereignty grew daily. The general deterioration reached the IDF. Morale sunk and senior officers began to criticize the General Staff and the Government of Israel. One who stood out in this criticism was Major Ariel Sharon. The public at large was unaware of all this due to strict military censorship of the media. The few in Mapai's leadership who were aware of these developments were very careful in their public utterances so as not to provide any ammunition to the opposition led by Menachem Begin. The government, the defense establishment and the army, as well as the Mapai leadership, found themselves without an authoritative and confident leadership. Mutual recriminations, slander and growing bewilderment made Ben-Gurion sorely missed.

In their growing despair, Golda, Aranne, Sapir and Eshkol intensified their trips to Sede Boker. Sharett noted wryly that Ben-Gurion's resignation increased the gas consumption in Israel. He knew that his colleagues were consulting with Ben-Gurion on virtually every major issue. He did the same, thus further eroding his own standing and authority.

In June 1954, a Ministerial Defense and Foreign Affairs Committee was established, headed by Sharett. Among its members were Golda Meir, Lavon, Eshkol and Aranne.<sup>7</sup> This confirmed her place among the top five decision makers in the country. Once again she became involved in foreign and defense policy, earning additional experience in these spheres. She felt as though she was back in the years 1946–1948 when she had last dealt with these matters. But even this body, designed to bring some order to these delicate issues, did not function properly, mainly because Defense Minister Lavon chose to ignore it as he ignored the IDF chain of command. For Golda, dedicated to values such as loyalty, trust, orderliness, cooperation, discipline and stability, Lavon's behavior was like a

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<sup>7</sup> Haggay Eshed, *Who Gave the Order*, Tel Aviv, 1979, p. 45.

nightmare. Soon she reached the conclusion that he had to be ousted from the Defense Ministry before he entangled Israel in perilous adventures.

In those difficult days of the summer of 1954, she continued to function in the Ministry of Labor and Construction, and even here there were arguments with Lavon. They argued about who would look after disabled soldiers—the Defense Ministry or her own ministry. They argued over who would build housing for new immigrants—the Histadrut or private construction companies or both.<sup>8</sup> In 1954, immigration fell considerably. Israel could now breathe easier and try to absorb the immigrants in a more orderly and planned fashion. German Reparations started flowing in the form of freighters, railway carriages and machinery. But these seemingly positive developments were accompanied by general deterioration in the situation along the borders. Hardly a night went by without shooting incidents, infiltration, sabotage, mining, theft and killing. The IDF, supported by the defense minister, demanded instant retaliation. The prime minister preferred moderation and time to examine each military operation before giving his approval. Golda often supported Sharett mainly because she wanted to demonstrate to all that he was the prime minister and there must be order, otherwise there would be anarchy at the top. Stability became for her a supreme value that had to be instilled mainly among new immigrants not yet at home with a multi-party democratic system. She was torn between her loyalty to Ben-Gurion, hoping that he would soon wake up from his Negev dream and return to navigate the ship of state now buffeted by very stormy waters. This was in line with her assessment regarding Sharett's poor ability to lead the nation in those days.

A number of times in 1954 Golda traveled abroad. She spent several few days in London as guest of the Joint Israel Appeal. On her way home, she stopped off in Rome and upon her return to Israel stated that cultural life of the Jewish community in Rome was fading away.<sup>9</sup> This was, of course, a quick and superficial assessment based on what she heard. In May 1954, she heard from Sapir rumors that a number of Ben-Gurion's Young Turks were pressuring him to carry out a putsch, suspend civil rights and rule of law, dissolve the Knesset and change the existing electoral system from proportional to district. Until all this happened, he should govern by decree with the help of the army. They also wanted to cause a spiritual re-awakening in Israel. Ben-Gurion never took this seriously, but the idea that some of the younger leaders were ready to suspend democratic rule in Israel did not endear them to the veteran leaders. In May 1954, Ben-Gurion summoned some of Mapai's leaders to discuss the future political structure of Israel.

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<sup>8</sup> Sharett Diary, 9 February 1954, pp. 344–345.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*



Golda attended, with Eshkol, Aranne, Lavon, Namir and Govrin. The “old man” proposed the creation of a “Popular Front” to rejuvenate Israel. He called on Mapai to change the electoral system so that there would be accountability on the part of the Knesset members to their voters and not to a party “Arrangement Committee”. They saw this as removing their influence on the nominations process. Ben-Gurion was already thinking of what amounted to a cultural revolution to bring about a spiritual change in the country that would spur young people to settle the Negev as a manifestation of the renewal of the pioneering spirit. He was increasingly concerned over the growing number of young men and women who sought a career in public service, the military, academy and industry. He regretted that what he considered the true Hebrew Revolution, designed to transform the Jewish people to productive self-sufficient one, had not yet occurred. Ben-Gurion was caught in a terrible dilemma. He wanted the best to help build Israel’s military-industrial complex to guarantee the survival of the country. But he also wanted pioneers who settled the empty Negev. His colleagues heard him politely. They did not share his vision. They saw no justification to change the electoral system that enabled Mapai to maintain its hegemony. They wanted normalization while he sought the continuation of the Zionist revolution. While he spoke of principles, they saw everything in the prism of politics. They feared that if his demands were met, the country would be thrown into a crisis. They were convinced that he was being incited by the Young Turks. It was easy for them to feel that way rather than blaming Ben-Gurion for this mad idea. They rejected his proposals as the country’s youth was apathetic to his calls to follow him to the Negev.<sup>10</sup>

As the relations between Sharett and Lavon further deteriorated, the number of trips to Sede Boker grew. Golda, Aranne, Sapir and Eshkol were often on the road to Ben-Gurion’s hut in the kibbutz. They demanded that Ben-Gurion come back and take over the Defense Ministry, even if it meant that he would not again become prime minister, at least for the time being. They were supported by another figure—Isser Harel, the head of Israel’s intelligence community. He joined them in calling for Lavon’s ouster.<sup>11</sup> Here was another example of a disturbed hierarchy: A senior, unelected official, serving as the head of the Mossad, one of the most sensitive positions in the country, joined politicians to depose one of their colleagues. In an emotional meeting, Golda pleaded with Ben-Gurion to return, citing the country’s deteriorating situation at home and its poor image abroad and stressing the need for national unity. But he was adamant. On November 30,

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<sup>10</sup> Bar-Zohar, Ben-Gurion, pp. 1014, 1037.

<sup>11</sup> Eshed, Who Gave the Order, p. 45.

1954, he told her: “I shall come back to the government only if there will be a majority to change the electoral system and to use state authority to direct the youth and new immigrants to settlements. If not, I shall carry on my work here”.<sup>12</sup> Few paid attention to the fact that he wanted state authority to determine where the youth and new immigrants would settle, in total contradiction to democratic principles and personal choice. But as they did not take his ideas seriously, they preferred to ignore this. The desire to see him back at least in the Defense Ministry overrode all other considerations.

In June, Golda represented Israel in the annual International Labor Organization sessions in Geneva and was on her way to Paris when she fell ill in Zurich. When she returned to Israel, she was greeted by a new “affair”, one that would undermine Israel’s foundations, its government and Mapai, one that became known as the Lavon Affair. The details of this “affair” were described in scores of books and articles. Golda first heard of it from Sharett on July 29, 1954, when he told her of what had transpired in Cairo and Alexandria. It appeared that an espionage ring of young Egyptian Jews working for Israeli military intelligence had planted explosives in American and British facilities in Cairo and Alexandria, hoping to sour relations between Egypt and those two powers. Thus, it was hoped, Britain would delay its planned evacuation from Egypt that would leave no buffer between Israel and Egypt. The ring was uncovered and its members arrested. Sharett told her that once he received details of the ring’s capture and the escape of its Israeli commander Avri Elad, he demanded explanations from the Director of the IDF Military Intelligence Colonel Benyamin Gibli. The latter reported that he had been given authorization to carry out the operation by the defense minister in a private meeting they held on July 16. Since no one else was present and no one else had taken notes, Lavon vehemently denied that he had given the order. When he was asked by Sharett who had given the order Lavon declined to answer.<sup>13</sup>

On that day, July 29, Peres told Golda that the senior staff of the Defense Ministry had enough of Lavon. The defense minister, claimed Peres, was planning various operations in the entire Middle East and misled the prime minister. Even Ben-Gurion came to the conclusion that he had made a serious error of judgment when he had appointed Lavon defense minister.<sup>14</sup> According to Sharett, Golda told him that Ben-Gurion’s understanding of human nature was similar to that of her granddaughter and she would insist Ben-Gurion must dismiss Lavon. On

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<sup>12</sup> Ben-Gurion Diary, 30 November 1954; Bar-Zohar, Ben-Gurion, p. 1039.

<sup>13</sup> Sharett Diary, 29 July 1954, pp. 561–562.

<sup>14</sup> Eshed, Who Gave the Order.

that day, Golda, Aranne and Eshkol traveled to Sede Boker to tell Ben-Gurion of impossible human relationships in the defense ministry. Apart from Lavon and Sharett, Golda, Eshkol and Aranne were the only ministers informed of the “affair”. The Israeli public was told nothing, and when the trial of members of the ring opened in Cairo, the Israel Government denied any connection with them and charged that the whole affair was staged. The few who read the British weekly “New Statesman and Nation” noted the following sentence: “It is desirable that Mr. Sharett impose strict control on the Israeli Defense Ministry and its secret operations”.

Prior to the opening of the trial, Lavon demanded that the prime minister appoint a commission of inquiry to look into what happened in Egypt. The commission was headed by the President of the Supreme Court Justice Yitzhak Olshan, the other member was former IDF Chief of Staff Ya’acov Dori. Even before they heard testimony, Lavon felt the ground burning under his feet and realized that his days in the Defense Ministry were numbered. But if he had to go, it should not be due to a searing fiasco in an enemy country. In his testimony, Lavon said that he was innocent and that his meeting with Gibli had taken place two weeks after the commencement of the operation. The operation’s commander Avri Elad was brought from Europe and testified that on his way from the airport he had been persuaded by senior IDF officers to testify in such a manner as to implicate Lavon. Lavon demanded Gibli’s dismissal but had no support. He then raised the ante and demanded that Dayan and Peres be replaced. His friends in the Mapai leadership rejected this demand not because of any great love for the chief of staff or the director general of the ministry of defense, but simply because they had lost any trust in his judgment and emotional stability.

As the time drew near to the sentencing of the Israeli ring members in Cairo, tension in Jerusalem rose. In January 1955, after one defendant committed suicide in prison, two were condemned to death, two drew life sentences and two others received long jail terms. Israel was stunned. Even those who knew nothing of the “affair” were horrified at the severity of the sentences. Meanwhile, the Dori-Olshan Committee completed its work and told the prime minister it was unable to determine beyond doubt who gave the order. Sharett realized that Lavon would have to draw the necessary conclusions, but if he was fired, this could be interpreted that Israel was responsible for the mess in Egypt, therefore Lavon remained at his post for the time being. This decision was not coordinated with Golda, Eshkol and Aranne. They had in turn reached the conclusion that Lavon must go and at once. They had no doubt who should succeed him: the previous Defense Minister Ben-Gurion. Sharett briefed Golda on the Dori-Olshan Committee conclusions and this confirmed her view that Lavon must go immediately.

On February 1, 1955, she joined Sharett, Eshkol and Aranne and traveled to Sede Boker to demand that Ben-Gurion reassume his position as defense minister, at least until the next Knesset elections due to be held at the end of 1955.<sup>15</sup> Lavon knew that Golda was among those who wanted his head. A copy of a letter he sent to Sharett on February 2 was sent by him to Golda.<sup>16</sup> He claimed that he was innocent of any charge. The Mapai leadership decided they must act quickly, sensing that Ben-Gurion was finally ready to consider their plea. On February 12 a meeting was held in Sharett's office with Golda, Eshkol, and Lavon. In the course of this meeting, Lavon realized that he had lost the trust of his colleagues and five days later announced his resignation. On that day, Golda and Namir went to Sede Boker to demand that Ben-Gurion come back at once. This time he consented, saying that he had received disturbing news of what was happening in the IDF. On the 11 pm news of that night the citizens of Israel learned that Ben-Gurion was back in the Defense Ministry and the entire country heaved a sigh of relief. Ben-Gurion was sworn in four days later, but the seeds of a growing rift between himself and Sharett over the conduct of foreign and defense policies were already sown. Ben-Gurion insisted that the Foreign Ministry stop interfering in matters of defense and announced that he would be the supreme authority in both spheres. Sharett did not react. One of Ben-Gurion's first moves was to remove Gibly as Head of the IDF Intelligence Branch and appoint him as deputy commander of the Northern Command.

Golda played a key role in this chapter of the "Lavon Affair". She insisted all along on his removal and on the return of Ben-Gurion. The "troika" that operated in this area consisted of Golda, Eshkol and Aranne, and they acted out of genuine concern for Israel's security, the ministry of defense, the government of Israel and Mapai. Lavon's dismissal was done summarily. However, the party decided it did not want to dispense with his services altogether and sent him back to the position he had held before he joined the Government—Secretary General of the Histadrut. He accepted and fulfilled this role loyally. Another potential heir to Ben-Gurion was thus removed from the top echelon.

As soon as he returned to the Ministry of Defense, Ben-Gurion approved a massive retaliation operation against the Egyptian army in the Gaza Strip. The operation was conducted on the night of February 27–28 and resulted in large

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<sup>15</sup> Sharett Diary, 1 February 1955, pp. 701–703; Eshed, *Who Gave the Order*, p. 151; on the Lavon Affair see also Goldstein, Eshkol, pp. 417–433; Eliyahu Hassin and Dan Horowitz, *The Affair*, Tel Aviv, 1961; Sheffer, *Moshe Sharett*, pp. 750–769; Michael Bar-Zohar, *The Phoenix—The Biography of Shimon Peres*, Tel Aviv, 2006, pp. 130–149; Shabtai Teveth, *Moshe Dayan*, Tel Aviv, 1971; Chaim Israeli, *Life Story*, Tel Aviv, 2005; Eyal Kafkafi, *Lavon—Anti Messiah*, Tel Aviv, 1998.

<sup>16</sup> Eshed, *Who Gave the Order*.

number of casualties. The IDF lost eight dead, while 36 Egyptian soldiers were killed. Sharett admitted that he was surprised by the dimensions of the operation. Nasser admitted he had realized that the Egyptian army was ill-prepared to fight Israel and he must obtain weapons from any source. A few weeks later he met in Burma with the prime minister of China Zhou En Lai. Both were on their way to the Conference of Non-Aligned Nations in Bandung, Indonesia, to which Israel was not invited. Zhou suggested that he mediate between Egypt and the Soviet Union. This deal, which became known as the “Czech-Egyptian Arms Deal”, consisted of hundreds of jet fighters, tanks, artillery and other weapons and totally altered the military balance of power between Israel and Egypt. It was one of the main causes for the Sinai War.

In those days Golda was involved in a totally different argument. In 1955, the wave of immigration to Israel, mainly from North African nations, increased. In a meeting of the Jewish Agency–Government of Israel Coordinating Committee Golda said that world Jewry would have to fund this immigration. If the new immigrants had to be housed urgently, it would come at the expense of veteran immigrants who would be forced to spend another winter in the transition camps. The costs were estimated at 25 million pounds. Golda turned to Israel Bonds and to her friend Henry Montor. He demanded that the United Jewish Appeal give preference to the sale of Bonds. The heads of the UJA asked Eshkol to mediate between the UJA and Bonds. In a meeting held on February 16, Sharett noted sarcastically in his diary that when it comes to Montor, Golda would see nothing wrong in his actions.<sup>17</sup> The discussions lasted throughout February. On February 24, Sharett noted that “the danger is that Golda, who cannot bring herself emotionally to wonder about Montor’s actions, sees in his outbursts something sacred. She will encourage him from here not to yield and will try to bring us to our knees by threatening to resign”.<sup>18</sup> The situation worsened when the heads of UJA asked for Montor’s replacement by Joseph Schwartz, another highly experienced professional. In an emotional phone conversation, Golda told Sharett that this would destroy the Bonds and blamed Teddy Kollek, the Director General of the Prime Minister’s Office, for this. Sharett noted that Golda’s friendship with Montor naturally affected her judgment. The issue came up before the cabinet. On March 20, Eshkol supported Montor’s resignation. Golda opposed. However, this time Montor realized he had lost the backing of the majority of the Israeli ministers and resigned. A few months later he left the public arena, moved to Italy, married a non-Jewish woman and his ties with Golda were severed. He died in Jerusalem in the 1980’s.

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<sup>17</sup> Sharett Diary, 12 February 1955, p. 722.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 16 February 1955, 24 February 1955 and 12 March 1955, pp. 733, 795, 838.

The Montor affair was marginal compared with what was happening on Israel's foreign and defense frontiers in those bitter months. In early March 1955, Ben-Gurion ordered the IDF to plan the occupation of the Gaza Strip to put an end to infiltrators called "fedayun" who entered Israel for purposes of sabotage and murder. On March 28 the plan was discussed by the senior Mapai ministers and they rejected it. Golda was among the minority that voted for. The plan was presented by the Chief of Staff, Moshe Dayan. Here was another anomaly—a senior officer taking part in a purely political party discussion. But Dayan was "one of us" and his participation was not seen as irregular. The next day, Ben-Gurion once again summoned the Mapai ministers and was supported by Golda, Dov Yossef and Eshkol. When the cabinet met on March 29, a heated argument ensued on the future of the Arab population of Gaza in case of an Israeli occupation. Ben-Gurion thought that two corridors could be left open—one to Egypt and one to the West Bank, to enable those wishing to leave to do so. The vote was taken on April 2 and the result was five in favor (including Golda) and nine against, led by Sharett. Aranne abstained, claiming he could not vote against Ben-Gurion for what he termed "irrational reasons". Sharett won a temporary, limited and what would soon prove to be a costly victory. Ben-Gurion now understood that he would have to garner broad ministerial support prior to a vote being taken. He also realized that Golda could be trusted to support him on military matters.<sup>19</sup>

In May 1955, another crisis erupted between Ben-Gurion and Sharett, this time over Ben-Gurion's demand that the Department for Armistice affairs be moved from the Foreign to the Defense Ministry. Sharett objected and Ben-Gurion threatened to resign. This time Golda threatened that she too would leave with him. The crisis was resolved in a typical Mapai fashion when it was decided that this department would remain in the Foreign Ministry but would act in close coordination with the Defense Ministry. On that day, Sharett noted in his diary that Ben-Gurion told young Mapai leaders that there were two cabinet members—Golda and Eshkol—who were worthy of serving in the cabinet. If he really said that, he was not very complimentary to the majority of the Mapai ministers.<sup>20</sup>

The next day the cabinet discussed Israel's response to a terrorist attack on Zacharia, a village of new immigrants southeast of Jerusalem. Golda demanded a vigorous response: the public was demoralized, the UN Security Council could not be relied upon and above all—Israel could not afford to be seen as helpless. The Israelis must know their government had a clear policy. When Sharett heard this,

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<sup>19</sup> Moshe Dayan, *Milestones*, Jerusalem, 1976, p. 143; Bar-Zohar, Ben-Gurion, pp. 1139–1140.

<sup>20</sup> Sharett Diary, 19 April 1955, p. 947.

he sensed that Golda was going to be the next foreign minister of Israel, and he was not wrong. Her words clearly reflected Ben-Gurion's thinking and position.<sup>21</sup>

In the summer of 1955, Israel entered an elections campaign. Reluctantly, and contrary to her wishes and character, Golda yielded to the party's writ and agreed to head the Mapai list for the Tel Aviv Municipal Council, the historic bastion of the General Zionists. When she was asked years later why she obeyed the will of the party, she replied: "Not once people spoke sneeringly of accepting the party's dictate. I pity anyone who does not understand the deep meaning of this. The movement is not a combine for preparing a list for the purpose of elections. A movement is a way of life, and belonging to a movement is voluntary. Once someone chooses to belong to a movement with which he identifies, this is his life. There is nothing more exalted than that". Her seat in the Knesset was preserved and Ben-Gurion promised that if she lost in Tel Aviv, she would continue as minister of labor in the next cabinet. For the time being, all differences of opinion in Mapai were forgotten and the entire leadership was mobilized to obtain the voters' confidence. The main issue was security and the ways required to ensure Israel's existence and power. Herut and Achdut Ha'avodah demanded an activist foreign policy which should, if necessary, include a preventive war to remove the immediate danger to the country. Mapai's heads were more circumspect in their public utterances, but in closed meetings they, too, spoke of the need to launch a preemptive war.

In the elections held on July 26, 1955, Mapai lost five seats in the Knesset and ended up with 40 mandates. Herut doubled its strength to 15 seats, mainly at the expense of the General Zionists who went down to 13. The religious parties won 17 seats, Achdut Ha'avodah rose to 10 seats, Mapam—9, the Progressives—5, Minority (Arab) parties—5 and the Communists won 6 seats. Mapai lost the Tel Aviv Municipality and Golda was relieved. Her candidacy as mayor was torpedoed by the Religious parties on the basis that a woman could not fulfill such an exalted role. The nightmare of being the mayor of Tel Aviv disappeared and she was glad to rejoin her colleagues around the cabinet table. But the events of the recent months left their mark on her. On August 3 she was rushed to Beilinson Hospital after complaining of chest pains. She was diagnosed with arrhythmia (irregular heart beats) and was hospitalized for ten days which she utilized for rest. Her schedule, which began at eight in the morning and lasted until late at night, two or three packs of cigarettes a day, tens of coffee cups, were enough to undermine the health of younger people. When she recovered, she participated in the negotiations for the establishment of the next coalition, once again headed

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<sup>21</sup> Sharett Diary, 20 April 1955, pp. 950–952.

by Ben-Gurion who would also continue as defense minister. The new government was sworn in on November 13, 1955, and won the confidence of 73 Knesset members; 23 voted against and three abstained. The coalition included Mapam, Achdut Ha'avodah, the National Religious Party and the Progressives. It could always rely on the five voters of the Arab Knesset members.

The voter clearly wanted a more hawkish government as Israel faced a critical dilemma regarding its very existence. In September, the details of the Czech-Egyptian arms sales were revealed. Egypt was about to receive 200 jet fighters and bombers (compared to the 30 Israel had). Nasser was also promised 230 tanks, 200 armored personnel carriers, 100 self-propelled artillery and 500 other pieces of artillery. There was talk of six submarines, destroyers and motor torpedo boats. These were gigantic quantities for any Middle Eastern country at the time and impelled Israel to launch a feverish diplomatic activity. Moshe Sharett flew to Geneva to meet the foreign ministers of the four major powers and demanded they supply Israel with arms to reinstate the balance of power. His mission yielded no results apart from sermonizing by the foreign ministers who told him that Israel must abide by the Armistice Agreements and rely on the UN. This was the message of Dulles, Pineau, Macmillan and especially Molotov. Dulles even warned Israel not to engage in a preventive war. On November 13, Ben-Gurion ordered the IDF to prepare a plan for the occupation of the Straits of Tiran and the removal of the naval blockade on Eilat (Operation "Omer"). When the plan was presented for cabinet approval in early December, it was rejected by 9 to 4. Sharett headed the opponents with the warnings he had heard from the foreign ministers still resonating in his ears. His opposition only widened the gap between him and Ben-Gurion.<sup>22</sup> The gap was not only a personality difference, but over fundamental issues. Sharett ascribed great value to diplomacy and the creation of a friendly international public opinion. Central to his concept was the United Nations and Israel's obligation to this body that had granted her both a birth certificate and legitimacy. Sharett feared that Israel, cut off from oil, food and foreign loans, its economy shaky, would collapse. Since he did not want to stress Israel's militaristic image and sought to ease the tension along the borders, he opposed the retaliation raids that won the reputation of an aggressor nation for Israel. The retaliatory raids often brought the Arab-Israel conflict to the Security Council. Sharett worried that the superpowers would eventually impose a settlement on Israel which would consist of border changes or ceding territory in the Negev in favor of Egypt and Jordan. Israel also found it hard to explain the disproportionate dimension of its retaliation raids to the attacks against it, often embarrassing American Jews and the few

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<sup>22</sup> Dayan, *Milestones*, p. 168.



friends Israel had abroad. Sharett believed in orderly and logical diplomatic arguments, although he supported the need to maintain the deterrent power of the IDF.

Sharett had a great advantage over Golda and Ben-Gurion. He knew the Arab mentality, world view, way of thinking and their flowery language. He had grown up in an Arab village north of Jerusalem in the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, spoke Arabic and Turkish fluently and had served as an officer in the Turkish Army in the First World War. He was among the few in the leadership who understood the depth of Arab nationalism and argued that while Zionism offered the Palestinian Arabs progress and material advantages, it ignored the nationalist question. His policy during the Mandate was to create a basis for co-existence or at least remove barriers on the way towards better Arab-Jewish understanding.

Ben-Gurion did not have much patience for Sharett's meticulous arguments. In the course of 1955, he reached the conclusion that war against Egypt was inevitable and nothing would deter him from this goal, even a cabinet majority. The question now was when Israel would go to war, under what conditions and whether it would be alone or have partners who might also wish to topple the Nasser regime. He concluded that Sharett lacked "spiritual strength, seeing the future and a penetrating understanding of complex situations". After Sharett resigned, Ben-Gurion wrote: "Ability to formulate and explain is not enough and the traits required for manning the helm in stormy seas—regrettably Moshe Sharett never did and does not possess. Negative escape from deeds by doing nothing is not enough, the lack of action harbors on occasion greater dangers for the future than any daring and fateful action".<sup>23</sup>

Golda replaced Sharett as foreign minister when he was away in Geneva in October 1955. She knew well of the growing differences between him and Ben-Gurion and usually sided with the latter. Further deterioration in Sharett-Ben-Gurion relations occurred when Sharett was in Washington in December 1955 seeking weapons from the United States. Ben-Gurion approved a large-scale retaliatory operation north of the Sea of Galilee in response to the killing of Israeli fishermen. Israel lost six men and the Syrian army over 70. From a military point of view, the operation was a success. But it doomed any hopes of obtaining American weapons. Sharett claimed that he had known nothing of the operation that pulled the rug from under him. On December 11, Golda arrived in New York on a speaking and fundraising tour and confirmed to Abba Eban that there had been no prior discussion between the IDF, the Defense Ministry and the Foreign Ministry. Ben-Gurion, as always, consulted himself. Eban was ordered to defend

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<sup>23</sup> On Sharett's policy see Michael Brecher, *Foreign Policy System of Israel*, pp. 251–290; see also Sheffer, *Moshe Sharett*.

the operation in the Security Council, and did so, as always, brilliantly, although he, too, was convinced that the operation was a major blunder and so cabled Ben-Gurion. In response he received what he called a “mischievous” reply from the “old man”: “I myself thought that we made a grave mistake, but when I read your speech in the Security Council defending my decision, I concluded that we acted correctly. I have nothing more to add...” The problem was not to convince Ben-Gurion but the Eisenhower administration and they were neither convinced nor amused. Ben-Gurion ascribed the failure to obtain American arms to Sharett, the latter to Ben-Gurion’s rash action.<sup>24</sup>

When Golda embarked on her speaking tour, she angered Sharett when she openly spoke of the possibility of war. He lunched with her and heard from her that the UJA slogan was “Arms for Israel”. Only by using the new emergency situation, would the UJA raise the hundred million dollars it set up as its goal for 1956. But American Jews were tired of “emergency”, asking if there had ever been a time when Israel had not been under a state of emergency. They wanted a more attractive slogan. Golda argued that arms were needed if war broke out soon. Sharett was critical of this approach and Golda threatened to halt her visit and return home.<sup>25</sup> But she relented and continued her tour. Although Ben-Gurion did not broach the matter directly, she was given to understand that she would succeed Sharett. Ben-Gurion’s aides were busy leaking information to the Israeli media that he was planning a major cabinet reshuffle.

By early 1956, it was obvious beyond any doubt that Sharett’s relations with Ben-Gurion had entered a deep crisis to make any future cooperation impossible. Ben-Gurion began to insult Sharett publicly. When Sharett reported to the cabinet, Ben-Gurion would read newspapers or leave the room, occasionally interrupting Sharett, asking him to speak briefly and to the point and to describe not what he told his foreign interlocutors but what they said to him. Cabinet meetings became a nightmare not only to Sharett but to other ministers as Ben-Gurion humiliated Sharett who many of them admired. Formally, Sharett still commanded a majority in the cabinet to block any military initiatives and used this on more than one occasion. But he realized that his majority was made up of non-Mapai ministers and that could be interpreted as non collegial. In early 1956, the two began to communicate through letters. Sharett realized that he was about to lose his post and faced a number of choices.

The first was to resign immediately. This would allow him to retain his self respect and maybe even win the position of deputy prime minister, an empty job.

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<sup>24</sup> Eban, *Autobiography*, p. 199.

<sup>25</sup> Sharett *Diary*, 14 December 1955, p. 1308.

He rejected the idea, stressing that this was tantamount to abandoning the ship during a severe gale, subordinating the Foreign Ministry to the Prime Minister's Office. He refused to abandon his ministry, the one he had built over the years ever since the days of the Jewish Agency's Political Department. He knew most of the officials and their families well. Many of them were recruited, trained and promoted by him. He knew morale in the ministry had sunk to its lowest point and the diplomats often felt themselves cut off from information, not to speak of total removal from any decision-making process. In early 1956, President Eisenhower sent his close friend Robert Anderson on a secret mission to Jerusalem and Cairo in a last-ditch effort to prevent war. He held separate talks with Ben-Gurion and Nasser, during the course of which Nasser said to him that he could resolve the Arab-Israel conflict in half an hour, but he would be shot immediately thereafter. Anderson's visit was known only to Ben-Gurion, Sharett, Teddy Kollek and Ya'acov Herzog, a senior foreign ministry official who was taken on by Ben-Gurion as his closest diplomatic adviser. The senior foreign ministry staffers were kept in the dark.<sup>26</sup>

Sharett was in no hurry to resign for another reason. He rightly sensed that his successor would be Golda Meir, whose intellectual and rhetorical prowess he did not appreciate highly. Sharett was a stickler to details. He believed in the power of the written and spoken word. He worked endlessly on his speeches and made sure the English translation that would appear the next day in the "Jerusalem Post" would be the correct one as foreign diplomats would read it in the "Post." Sharett, a dapper man, fluent in seven languages, university graduate, master of formulation, spent hours in formulating diplomatic notes, even though he could charge his underlings with this task. He was a riveting conversationalist, unending fountain of stories, often annoying those around him with his pedantic approach to issues. Golda, whose command of English and Yiddish was good, her Hebrew minimal, relied on others to write her speeches and messages and hardly had any time to read books, although she loved the theater and classical music concerts. She, too, was a lively storyteller and stood out in any group. She was the first to admit that compared to Sharett, her intellectual inferiority was evident. But she had other attributes—quick grasp of issues, and above all—her ability to make decisions.

Sharett had another option. He could attempt to create a situation in which Ben-Gurion would resign and reform the coalition without him. But as a loyal and above all a responsible party member, he did not dare consider such a

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<sup>26</sup> On the Andersen Mission see Bar-Zohar, Ben-Gurion, pp. 1161–1165; see also Mordechai Gazit, "Peace Makers—Mediation in the Arab-Israel Conflict", in Yegar et al., ed., Ministry for Foreign Affairs The First Fifty Years, Jerusalem, 2002, pp. 131–142.

possibility that would plunge Israel into a deep political crisis at the worst time. Sharett had limited public support, mainly among academics and intellectuals, and was highly popular among the Mapai leadership. But he feared a head-on confrontation with Ben-Gurion. His third option was to hang on, hoping that Ben-Gurion would change his mind, forgive or even forget. But this did not happen. At night, an embittered Sharett would pour out his heart to his diary and on occasion would share his feelings with senior foreign ministry officials. They believed in him, in his policy and ideology. They also feared Ben-Gurion, detested the heads of the Defense Ministry and feared the IDF command. Deep in their heart, they ridiculed Golda. They wondered about her world-view on foreign affairs. The opportunity to learn of her ideas came in May 1956, during the sessions of the 24<sup>th</sup> Zionist Congress held in Jerusalem. Golda spoke in Yiddish and focused on foreign affairs rather than on immigration and absorption, housing and employment. She sought to explain in her own way “to you and to myself some points that seem self-evident, and should be clear to the Zionist Congress, to the Zionist Movement and to the Jewish people. I think they ought to be clear to the rest of the world. I think that things are very simple: there is no argument that Israel now faces a grave danger. In all the years since the establishment of Israel we have not been in such a danger...” She went on to say that a stranger who accidentally listened to the discussions in the Congress on the need for peace or war could think that the choice on this fateful issue was in Israel’s hands. She lashed out at those who doubted Israel’s readiness to make peace:

The truth is that even in 1947, before the establishment of the state and immediately after the establishment of Israel and after we fought the War of Independence. All those years of murder and attacks on settlements and on individuals throughout the country, in north and south, there was hardly a night, a day or an hour, during which the heads of this country and the entire Jewish Yishuv, did not utter this one word: Peace. My friends and colleagues: Do we have to clarify to ourselves what we are trying to clarify to the entire world? I do not claim that the world understands this. I am convinced they do but do not want to understand...

This was followed by the simplistic assertion:

There is nothing easier in the world than to make peace between Israel and its Arab neighbors...at once. Our Arab neighbors have but to cease firing and there will be peace. Obviously, we want formal peace—signed peace between ourselves and our neighbors. This is our desire. But first, let the bloodletting cease. It is enough that Egypt, Syria and Jordan order their troops to cease shooting along the borders, to send terrorist gangs to murder and to burn, and in a moment—not the moment they order cessation, but the moment they stop—there will be peace between us and our neighbors...But this is not in our hands. All that the Jewish State and each one in it desire is peace...we cannot lull ourselves with one of the most dangerous illusions, that there will be a transformation between our desire and the

reality. Our wholehearted desire and wish is peace. But the reality in which we live but calls for maximum readiness for the possibility they will attack us and start a new war against us. If so, we must be prepared to repel our neighbors' attack and be victorious in this war. There is no contradiction between our desire for peace and our readiness for war

She clearly hinted at the possibility of a war when she said:

We hate war...we fear war. If there is anyone who says he does not fear war, I do not believe him, and if he really does not fear war, the conduct of war must not be given to him. Only people who hate and fear war... should we entrust them with the conduct of war. When we can be assured that only when there will be no other choice, only when we shall be forced to defend ourselves, only then will they go to war. Only in the hands of such people we can entrust the existence of the state in times of war and peace

Golda declared that one should not engage in sweet dreams of peace, which she considered no less than a crime. And then she came to her concept of the peace:

I want to say one word about peace. I confess that I m terrified not only of war. I am terrified when in certain places in the world there is talk of peace in Israel and the Middle East. What peace? At what price? Compromises at whose expense? Concessions and compromises are usually very nice attributes. But our view is that they fit the rich and not the poor. I want to know, this poor people, the Jewish State, with the tiny piece of land, what compromises are being asked of us? What decisions will they make on our concessions?

I am afraid of another sort of peace. I am afraid of an idyll that will be created between East and West not over any other issue but over peacemaking between us and our neighbors without our agreement. I tremble of such peace. It is tantamount to war. Because we have nothing to concede, we have taken nothing from others, we owe nothing to others—so we have nothing to hand over. It is impossible to make any concessions at our expenses. It is impossible that at our expense yesterday's and tomorrow's enemies will meet and connive to arrange the matter. Peace without our agreement is something the State of Israel cannot accept...

Jews around the world must know this too, they cannot be allowed, with all their yearning for peace, to be misled by the magic of the word peace, and when statesmen who do not send us weapons but do so to Egypt come to us to talk about peace. I say to you with all simplicity, these words about peace have to be treated respectfully but suspiciously, and they have to be analyzed in a cold manner. Something else: we are not a great power. From the standpoint of physical power and territory we shall never be a power. But we have a yearning to occupy our place in the world, a place of honor in other spheres. We are a sovereign state and master of its own within its borders, and if in certain spheres it would be silly and impertinent on our part to be equal to other powers and compete with them, one thing must be clear: The sovereign right of the Jewish State to develop the Jordan sources is no less in any way than the right of the American Government to develop the Tennessee Valley.

And if there is someone who thinks that by frightening us with war they will come to us with orders: don't take water here, don't establish new settlements there, don't travel here and don't go there. If there is anyone who thinks that by waving the sword of war over

our heads it will be enough to deter us from exercising our elementary rights, rights that every sovereign nation possesses in its country, this is a huge mistake and could be a tragic mistake for us and for the entire world. How do statesmen understand this, those who allow themselves even not to deliver correct information on the River Jordan water. It is not true that the Security Council decided that Israel does not have the right to utilize the Jordan waters. Not true, and I am using a parliamentary term, because the Council did not do so and to the best of our knowledge cannot do so. These waters are wholly within our territory. We are the masters of these waters, only we. We only said and we are saying that when we deal with the water issue or other development spheres, and we believe in this fully, that Israel's development could be a blessing to the nations of the region. When we were offered a large-scale development plan for water resources, a plan that could bring blessing to Israel and the Arab states, we were not the ones who thwarted this plan. But if someone will say that since the Government of Jordan does not care how its citizens live, if they have or do not have water, if something can or cannot be grown there, as long as the Government of Jordan does not care at what level of development their country and people will be, Israel too does not have the right to develop its land and water. If this they will say we shall answer—no. There will be no one in Israel who will accept this decree. This is not peace.

But I wish first of all that Jews will understand this, that they should not see themselves as having to make excuses to their neighbors in the Diaspora, that somewhere there is a State of Israel and the Jews there are strange people, with terrible tempers, who do not want peace, seeking excuses and creating problems and thereby placing heavy burden on Jews in the Diaspora. Not for that we lived, worked and fought in Eretz Israel and out side this country, some more and some less, and we won a Jewish State, so that we have to make excuses over our very existence and over the future of the State.

I have stated: peace can come the moment our neighbors will stop shooting at us. We hope they will not only promise not to shoot but will really stop. It is important because they have promised this once. Let us hope they fulfill what they promised. But I want to say openly and clearly: If they fulfill their promise, there will be peace and quiet. If they do not, let it be known, Jewish lives in the State of Israel will not go without license. There has never been an instant when, without prior outside provocation, but with a Jewish initiative in the Jewish State, that one hair of anyone of the millions of our neighbors living in the region was lost. If there are in the world, both in the East or West, statesmen who sermonize to us that human life is valuable and we must not do this or that, we say—Jewish blood is not less red than Arab blood, and Jewish lives are as valuable as Arab lives, no less than that. Jewish lives in the State of Israel will be totally safe. Every border area settlement, in the south or north, every child in his parent's home, at work, at school will be fully protected. The hand that will be brandished at old men, women or children will but cut off as it was in the past. And let no world statesmen sermonize to us hypocritically on morality and human life and what is permissible and what is not. If there is someone who sermonizes to us, it is the Jewish people and I say again: it is important that the Jews understand this first and will explain this to their children at home, so that God forbid they will not feel ashamed of us because there is someone in Washington or Moscow or London who has an interest to blur matters and not differentiate between the killer and the victim.<sup>27</sup>

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27 Protocols of the 24<sup>th</sup> Zionist Congress, Jerusalem, 1957, pp. 114–118.

An analysis of this speech that came from her heart, in a language in which she could express herself freely, without a prepared text, shows not only Golda's simplistic thinking, but also exposes her lack of understanding of the Arab mentality. Her point of departure was Israel's unassailable right to exist within secure borders. She was not ready to accept the reality in which the Arab world viewed Israel in a totally different light, and that their world view, values and basic assumptions dictated their policies. To her, if only they acted logically and ceased firing, all would be well. She knew, but perhaps did not deeply understand, that the Arabs sought revenge that meant the annihilation of the Jewish State and believed that there was only one way to deal with Israel: through a holy war that would be a war of annihilation. She failed to understand that for the Arab leaders, the solution did not lie in formal negotiations between leaders who accepted the same rules. In the Arab world, politics, religion, morality and society were all inter-connected. The problem was not shooting along the borders, but an overall war on all fronts. She failed to explain to her audience the depth of the historic Arab hostility and deeply ingrained enmity, perhaps because she feared that many would despair of ever finding a solution.

In spite of the fact that Israeli leaders spoke much of direct negotiations, they dreaded the possibility that in the course of such negotiations, Israel would be asked to accept new borders—somewhere between the lines of the 1947 partition plan and the 1949 Armistice Demarcation lines. Hints of such demands were quite transparent. In those days, there were few Israelis who thought that the process of the Arab states coming to terms with Israel's existence could take generations. They honestly thought that if only the Arab leaders were willing to sit with them around the negotiating table, they would be able to convince the Arabs of their sincerity and their yearning for peace, and the Arabs would be ready to move towards arrangements in such a spirit. Unhappily, in spite of the proximity of the Arabs to Israel, the psychological gap was enormous. Golda and other Israeli leaders treated the conflict as a diplomatic exercise and refused to admit or even understand that the conflict existed in far deeper spheres. Unlike Ben-Gurion or Sharett, apart from her two meetings with King Abdullah, Golda had no experience of dealing with Arab leaders. Throughout her career, apart from her two years as Head of the Jewish Agency Political Department, she dealt mainly with domestic affairs. She did not devote much time and thought to study the Arab issue properly and in depth. She relied on experts, such as Sasson and Danin, but did not always understand them. Among the few who realized that what was involved was a lengthy and painful process was Moshe Sharett, and he was about to lose his job. Golda did not believe in long historic processes. She was a pragmatic woman and was adamant that if you cannot achieve well-defined goals within a plausible timeframe, they should be left alone and abandoned, or else

they would divert the minds of Israelis from the more immediate dangers and would cause harm. Golda was always oriented on achieving clear-cut goals and often impatient and not ready to wait for history to do its thing. The Jewish People had no time, she often said. On occasion she preferred a policy of doing nothing, which she thought was preferable to initiating action that could be dangerous. Her Congress speech clearly reflected her determined approach: Israel could not wait indefinitely in a situation of no war-no peace because it could lose. Her main conclusion was that Israel must entrench itself and see the situation as it was instead of wallowing in illusions.

The Israeli media devoted little space to her speech. Sharett read it, as was his habit, carefully, and it confirmed his fears as to her worldview. By the end of May, he realized that Ben-Gurion was determined that he must go, and the sooner, the better. The manner in which he was removed from “his beloved office”, as Golda sneeringly called it, was brutal. In April, Ben-Gurion considered appointing Sharett Secretary General of Mapai in an effort to revive the party after its setback in the last elections. In May, Ben-Gurion hosted a discussion of the Mapai ministers in which he said that Golda and Eshkol were likely candidates for his position. Sharett fell into the trap, and said, perhaps jokingly: “Good, perhaps I should become the party secretary”. Ben-Gurion took it seriously and two days later offered Golda the job of foreign minister. In her memoirs she wrote: “I could not believe what I heard. It never entered my mind even as a remote possibility and I was not sure I would want or be able to handle the position”. This was written in 1974 and was far from the truth. She had known well for the past few months that she was going to replace Sharett. The question was the timing and the manner. But as was the habit in Mapai, the first reaction to the offering of a new job is to refuse, then a series of pleas and finally yielding. The problem now was far more sensitive because she was about to replace a colleague in a most un-collegial manner. But she was convinced that Sharett had to go for the sake of the cabinet’s unity and for the sake of a consistent and clear presentation of Israel’s foreign policy. It was not acceptable that Israel spoke with two voices.<sup>28</sup>

At the end of May, the Israeli media was rife with rumors regarding a reshuffle in the Mapai leadership. There was a discussion of appointing two secretaries for the party—Golda and Sharett. Eshkol’s name was also mentioned. On June 3,

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<sup>28</sup> On the manner in which Sharett was removed see Sharett Diary, p. 1401; Meir, *My Life*, p. 276; Bar-Zohar, *Ben-Gurion*, pp. 1188–1190; Zaki Shalom, “Sharett’s Resignation from the Government—Personal, Political, Security and Party Aspects”, in *Zionism*, 20, 1996, pp. 259–299; Sheffer, *Moshe Sharett*, pp. 841–921; Motti Golani, *There Will be a War This Summer: The Road to the Sinai War 1955–1956*, Tel Aviv, 1997; Protocols of the discussion in Mapai Central Committee, 17 June 1956, Labor Party Archive.



Sharett noted that Ben-Gurion came up with a new idea. He, Ben-Gurion, would be the secretary general, Sharett would serve again as prime minister, Golda would become foreign minister and another leader would serve as defense minister. This idea was discussed in a Ben-Gurion-Sharett meeting where a last-ditch effort was made by Ben-Gurion to convince Sharett to find himself another position. Pinchas Sapir was sent to convince Sharett to give up the Foreign Ministry but failed. On June 7 Sharett wrote to Ben-Gurion that he rejected the idea of appointing Golda as foreign minister and suggested that she travel to Geneva to represent Israel in the annual meeting of the International Labor Organization. Maybe he thought that with Golda abroad for a week or two, things would quiet down. Ben-Gurion rejected the idea and in a letter the next day he informed Sharett that Golda was staying home and he would consult with her as a candidate for the position of foreign minister. Sharett had no option but to wait for the axe to fall.<sup>29</sup>

Parallel to this, Ben-Gurion engaged in a move that hurt Golda deeply. There is no doubt that he truly believed she could handle the post of foreign minister with distinction and efficiency. But he may have harbored doubts as to her ability to handle the intricacies of modern diplomacy. Since he was not deeply impressed with the senior officers of the Foreign Ministry, apart from Ya'acov Herzog and Abba Eban, he sought a foreign policy expert who would serve as minister of state for foreign affairs, someone who would guide Israel's diplomacy. He chose Abba Eban, Israel's brilliant ambassador to Washington and the United Nations and, as Eban later wrote, Ben-Gurion

asked me to come to Jerusalem for consultation and suggested that I leave my Washington embassy to become chief adviser on foreign affairs to himself. I would thus be a kind of a watchdog over the new foreign minister, Golda Meir, with a direct line of command to Ben-Gurion. It seemed clear to me—and even clearer to Golda Meir—that this was an infallible prescription for antagonistic explosions in which Mrs. Meir and I and, perhaps even Ben-Gurion, would be injured every day by flying splinters of jurisdictional discord. At luncheon in her house, Mrs. Meir and I agreed that we could best cooperate across the ocean...Golda and I reached unprecedented harmony by agreeing on one point: that she and I would be happy and creative in proportion to the geographic distance separating us from each other.<sup>30</sup>

The idea deeply hurt Golda. She did not require any watchdog. True, she had limited experience in foreign affairs, but how dare Ben-Gurion appoint an equal partner in the decision-making process and more so, with direct link to Ben-Gurion. Eban was younger than Golda by 17 years, with far more impressive

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<sup>29</sup> Sharett Diary, 7–8 June 1956, pp. 1419–1421.

<sup>30</sup> Eban, *Autobiography*, p. 203.

experience in international affairs, but with virtually no political experience or party backing in Israel. When she heard of this idea, she was furious, partly because she was not even consulted about this appointment. It proved to her that in spite of Ben-Gurion's warm and supportive attitude, he really did not fully appreciate her talents. The fact that he wanted a foreign affairs specialist next to her only showed lack of full trust by him.

The next few days were very difficult. Ben-Gurion demanded that she accept his offer. On June 13, Sharett wrote in his diary that Aranne and Zeev Sherf told him that Golda was very gloomy and about to tell Ben-Gurion she would not take the job. But when she saw Ben-Gurion she found him very depressed and later said: "If he had asked me to jump from the fifth floor, I would have done so". She had not yet given her final response and Sharett wrote: "Maybe she really thinks she is not up to the position". Three days later, she told Arthur Lurie, a senior foreign ministry official, that the idea of Eban becoming minister of state was "madness". Ben-Gurion was brutal to Sharett, but he also hurt Golda. The Eban idea was dropped and she accepted the foreign ministry and now there remained the formalities.

The final scene was enacted in a special cabinet session on June 16 in the morning, during which Sharett read his letter of resignation. None of his colleagues rose to protest the manner in which he was removed. They all bowed to Ben-Gurion's dictates. Some may have wondered over the removal of Lavon eighteen months earlier, not very elegant as well. Sharett harbored ill will to Golda for the rest of his life. She, who spoke of friendship and loyalty, how could she inherit the post of a friend and colleague of over thirty years. Where is the collegiality? But he may have not realized that Ben-Gurion had explained to Golda the gravity of Israel's security situation and may have hinted that refusal to take the job was tantamount to a soldier deserting his post in times of war. The harsh conditions did not allow for collegial niceties, Israel was headed to war—a preventive one or a defensive one—and this called for a cabinet reshuffle.

It can be assumed that she was ready for a change, in spite of her claims that she loved the Ministry of Labor. She had served in this capacity for seven years, to her the best years of her life, but she was ready for a change, for new assignments, for a well deserved promotion. In Israel, the foreign minister is the third in seniority after the prime minister and the defense minister. In fact, she would now be number two in the cabinet. Being an ambitious woman, she was set on showing both Ben-Gurion and Sharett that she was able to handle the job no less than Sharett. The doubts raised by Ben-Gurion only led her to say: "I will show you what I am made of". She could always argue that the job was imposed on her by Ben-Gurion and she accepted it to prevent Ben-Gurion from resigning. Meanwhile, Sharett lashed out at her in his diary:

It is impossible to fathom this great woman, not for her own good and her duty to a friend and colleague. She knows well that this assignment is way above her head. From years of experience and acquaintance, I have seen her sense of inferiority due to her being semi-literate, she is very sensitive to her limitations that derive from the lack of general education, her inability to formulate her thoughts in writing, her not being accustomed to prepare a decent speech and be precise in designing a political stand etc. etc. She will not be able to dictate instructions cables on complex matters, less so to author a broad brief in writing—all the jobs that the Ministry had become used to being very well done by the minister. How does she assume such a responsibility? There is also the moral issue of her cooperation in my removal and her agreement to replace me after my ouster. All the tales that she is miserable and ready to jump from the fifth floor etc. do not tally and do not respond to this moral question.<sup>31</sup>

His meaning was quite obvious. He was the exact opposite of all the attributes that he saw in her. He forgot one main consideration, and perhaps the key one: Ben-Gurion was not interested in how Golda formulated her thoughts or how she would dictate a cable and hold briefings over complex matters. For all this, there were aides and secretaries and bureau heads. The “old man” wanted someone he could trust at all times, who would work with him in harmony, not argue or organize a cabinet majority against him, and above all retain unity among the Mapai ministers in the cabinet. When Sharett finished reading his letter of resignation, he rose and left the cabinet room. Later that day, he moved his belongings from the official residence of the foreign minister to his private apartment, some 200 meters away. His office did not even bother to furnish a truck to move his books and mementoes. They were moved in his wife’s car. Finally, Teddy Kollek organized a proper move.

That afternoon, Ben-Gurion announced in the Knesset the resignation of the foreign minister. After lauding him in moving words, saying: “There are still many exploits ahead of the man who stood at the helm of our foreign policy for close to half a century,” he added: “According to the cabinet decision, from now on the minister of labor, Mrs. Golda Meir, will be foreign minister”. Mordechai Namir was co-opted to the cabinet to replace Golda. Ben-Gurion said nothing more of Golda and why she deserved this position. At the conclusion of the Knesset debate following his announcement, Ben-Gurion responded: He did not pour heaps of praise on Golda, in fact he barely mentioned her. Instead he explained how he saw the role of the Foreign Ministry and left no doubt that it would be subordinate to the security policy and would serve as a sort of a department in the Defense Ministry. For him, harmony meant obeying the orders of the defense minister. Golda’s role would be to explain his decisions to a hostile and brutal world. He went on:

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<sup>31</sup> Sharett Diary, 13 June 1956, p. 1443.

However, recently, after the security matters became exceptionally grave, and foreign policy dangers multiplied more than previously...I have reached the conclusion that there is need now, for the sake of the country, that there be total accord—to the extent humanely possible—between the foreign and the defense ministries and there is now need for a different leadership in the Foreign Ministry, not because I think there is need to deviate from the course charted by those who are part of the government and devoted much time to formulating the basic guidelines, I certainly see no reason to change the foreign and defense policies.

Yet, I saw that in these difficult times, there must be maximal accord between these two ministries, defense and foreign, that actually deal with the same matter. Because the other matters dealt with by the Foreign Ministry that do not relate to defense, actually do not have much value at this time. In normal times, the foreign policy does not focus only on defense issues; this is not the case now, and while there is blessing in differences of opinions in the cabinet, there is need to my thinking, that there be harmony between those who implement in the two ministries whose matter is one.<sup>32</sup>

Golda understood well that in this struggle the Defense Ministry won. Its heads, and especially Shimon Peres, understood that they had no obligation to consult and coordinate with the heads of the Foreign Ministry and this would cause the accumulation of much ill will and heavy bitter personal residue over the years. A number of senior foreign ministry officers who read the new situation well considered resigning in solidarity with the ousted Moshe Sharett. They included Ya'acov Herzog, Gideon Rafael and Arthur Lurie. Sharett rejected the idea. Golda never forgave them for this move and would in the future find ways to get even with them. They were civil servants, she said, and must not allow personal sentiments such as loyalty to the former minister to cloud their judgment. The resignation threat was idle. She would not have regretted it if they had carried it out. This affair only illustrated to her that she was entering a ministry where there was a family atmosphere. For the next ten years of her term, she felt like a stranger there. As she came to like the job and even enjoyed it at times, she never liked the Foreign Ministry as such.

The initial period of adjustment was very difficult for her. Her first day was the hardest. Sharett did not hand over the job in an official ceremony. “So one day I made my appearance at the Foreign Ministry all by myself, feeling and probably looking miserable”. Sharett had briefed her at his home for three solid days. He noted that during these three days, she listened attentively but never took one note. The media received her appointment positively. Sharett was lauded, Golda less so. Regret was expressed over the manner of the ouster and it was noted that Israel now had a de-facto foreign minister—Ben-Gurion, and a de-jure foreign minister—in the shape of Golda Meir. Her first few days in the new position were

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<sup>32</sup> Prime Minister Statement in the Knesset, 18 June 1956.

not happy. While she knew all the heads of the departments from her days in the Jewish Agency's Political Department, it did not mean she liked all of them. The exceptions were those who had served with her in Moscow. Of those days she wrote in her memoirs:

The first few months as foreign minister were not much happier. It wasn't only that I was a novice among experts. It was also that Sharett's style was so different from mine, and the kind of people he had chosen to work with him—though they were all remarkably competent and genuinely dedicated—were not necessarily the kind of people with whom I was accustomed to work. Many of the more senior ambassadors and officials had been educated in British universities, and their particular brand of intellectual sophistication, which Sharett admired so much, was not always my cup of tea. Nor, to be honest, could I have any illusion about the fact that some of them obviously didn't think I was the right person for the job. I was certainly not known either for my phraseology or for any great concern with protocol, and seven years at the Ministry of Labor wasn't their idea of the most suitable background for a foreign minister.<sup>33</sup>

The manner in which she was appointed to this post was not to her liking and left a sense of bad feeling. Politics is a vicious game—this she knew well. However it was hard for her to watch Sharett's humiliation, even though she realized that it was inevitable and that he too contributed much to his own downfall. In the future, she would find it difficult to remove people from their post. This applied to her driver, members of her inner bureau, director generals and later even ministers. Sharett's ouster was a nightmare that haunted her for many years. She was determined that if people had to be removed from their posts, there were more elegant ways to do so.

From his home in Rehavia, Sharett followed her first steps in the ministry intently. He was briefed daily by his men, something that increased Golda's suspicion of "Sharett's people". They told him that the general atmosphere in the ministry calmed down, although they complained of the intellectual limitations of the new minister and their inability to reach Ben-Gurion. She dictated that policy. Apart from those whom Ben-Gurion summoned directly, she would serve as the only conduit to him. Very quickly she learned what Ben-Gurion meant by harmony. On July 18, the United Nations Secretary General Dag Hammarskjöld visited Israel in a final effort to calm the tensions along the Israel-Egypt Armistice lines. Golda did not take part in the five-hour conversation between Ben-Gurion and Hammarskjöld. In the following cabinet session, Ben-Gurion was asked what they had discussed and replied that he had forgotten.<sup>34</sup> She realized that

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<sup>33</sup> Meir, *My Life*, pp. 212–213.

<sup>34</sup> John Kimche, *The Second Arab Reawakening*, London, 1970, p. 212.

she would not derive much happiness from the leader. But before she got used to the idea that she was the foreign minister, Nasser nationalized the Suez Canal on July 26, 1956, and the Middle East was plunged rapidly to a crisis that would lead directly to the Sinai war. All personal problems were swept aside as Israel's leaders now faced new perils and opportunities.

## 12 The Sinai War (1956–1957)

Before Golda Meir—she hebraized her name at Ben-Gurion insistence –, had a chance to settle into her new office on the second floor of the wretched huts that housed the Foreign Ministry compound in the Romema quarter of Jerusalem, she was swept, with the rest of Israel, into the maelstrom that would evolve into the Sinai Campaign. As early as 1951, Ben-Gurion began to examine a number of military options designed to provide an answer to the hypothetical case of British withdrawal from Egypt. This possibility would remove the buffer zone between Israel and Egypt where thousands of British troops were stationed defending the Suez Canal, thus increasing the chances for an Israel-Egypt war. As far as Ben-Gurion was concerned, the Negev represented Israel's future as it comprised 60 % of Israel's territory and contained some of its natural resources. In case of war, the Negev could become the key battleground. This prospect led Ben-Gurion to devote much time and thought to its future. Like Golda, whose love for this region was intensified ever since her daughter Sarah settled in kibbutz Revivim in 1944, Ben-Gurion also loved the Negev. The two leaders understood the vast potential of this region and were terrified by the fact that its inhabitants numbered less than 4 % of Israel's population. Unlike Ben-Gurion who wanted to direct most of Israel's development resources to the Negev, Golda was more sober and realistic and thought some resources must be diverted to other sparsely populated areas of the country such as the Galilee.

When he returned to the Defense Ministry in February 1955, Ben-Gurion began to hear from various sources hints of an Anglo-American plan designed to win Nasser's friendship for the West in return for the transfer of Israeli territory in the Negev to Egypt. This plan, code-named "Alpha", was concocted in great secrecy in the British Foreign Office in coordination with the US Department of State. Ideas were being discussed to force Israel to return to the original 1947 partition lines and hand over large chunks of land to Egypt and Jordan, including Beer Sheba. In return, Israel would be allowed to retain Western Galilee. This was, in some ways, a return to the Bernadotte Plan of the summer of 1948. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles and British Prime Minister Anthony Eden suggested that Nasser would be asked to guarantee the continued functioning of the Suez Canal and protect it in war and peacetime. In case of an outbreak of a third world war, they expected that Nasser would allow the use of bases on Egyptian soil by American and British troops.<sup>1</sup> In late 1955, even France was secretly

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<sup>1</sup> John Kimche, "How they Plotted to Take the Negev Away", *Jerusalem Post*, 24 May 1986; Neil Caplan, *Futile Diplomacy*, London, 1997; Shimon Shamir, "The Collapse of Project Alpha", in William Roger Louis and Roger Owen, eds., *Suez—The Crisis and its Consequences*, London, 1989, pp. 73–100.

informed of the plan. The scheme stunned Ben-Gurion. When Eden and Dulles went public and demanded that Israel seriously consider making territorial concessions to the Arabs in return for guaranteeing her existence and well-being, he was determined that Israel must preserve the entire Negev, whatever the price. In his contacts with the Americans and British, Sharett clarified to them Israel's total rejection of the "Alpha" plan. Ben-Gurion sensed that before it would be possible to implement the plan on the ground, much time would elapse and perhaps Israel would by then have taken steps to topple the Nasser regime. On a number of occasions he spoke of the need to topple Nasser being one of the major aims of the coming war. Other war aims would be the annihilation of the terrorist bases in the Gaza Strip and the destruction of the Egyptian army with its new weapons before they had a chance to absorb the huge quantities that were pouring into Egypt from Eastern Europe. Obviously a major aim was the lifting of the naval blockade on the Straits of Tiran and of possibly opening of the Suez Canal for Israeli shipping.

Nasser's announcement of the Czech-Egyptian arms deal on September 27, 1955, struck Israel like a lightning bolt. The specter of a second round haunted the Israeli public who did not know that two of its leaders, the minister of defense and the IDF chief of staff, were already busy planning a preventive war initiated by Israel, designed to prevent Egypt from attacking first once it had integrated the newly arrived Soviet weapons. It was clear that the balance of power was about to tilt against Israel, leaving it no alternative but to strike first. Ben-Gurion and his associates estimated that Egypt could be ready to launch a war in the summer of 1956.<sup>2</sup> In November 1955, Ben-Gurion ordered Dayan to draw up plans for an Israeli attack on Sharm el-Sheikh to break the naval blockade on Eilat. Meanwhile, the policy of retaliatory acts continued.<sup>3</sup> On October 31, 1955, Golda, Eshkol, Ben-Gurion, Aranne and Moshe Dayan approved a military operation against Egyptian forces that were illegally positioned in the demilitarized zone of Nitsana. The operation took place in early November and Egypt lost fifty soldiers. The cabinet, under Sharett's influence, refused to authorize Ben-Gurion's proposal to break into the southern tip of the Sinai Peninsula. The cabinet was in fact telling Ben-Gurion that it was too early to launch a preventive war. For the time being, the IDF and the country must focus on preparations for war and acquire more weapons to meet a possible Egyptian attack.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Mordechai Bar-On, "Operation Sinai—Causes and Achievements", in *Monthly Review* 53/11, 1986, p. 11.

<sup>3</sup> Bar-Zohar, Ben-Gurion, pp. 1156–1157; Dayan, *Milestones*, pp. 160–168.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 158–159.



The attempts to obtain arms in the United States failed. Israel was more successful in France, where the director general of the Defense Ministry Shimon Peres continued his efforts to obtain jet planes and tanks. In the spring of 1956, France became Israel's major arms supplier when 24 Mystere 4a jet fighters landed at an Israeli air base. They were followed by tanks, artillery and spare parts that came by sea. The bridge across the Mediterranean was now in operation and vastly improved the mood of Ben-Gurion and the members of the General Staff. Few in Israel knew that prior to agreeing to sell arms to Israel, France sought and received approval from Washington. Dulles was not prepared to fully abandon Israel, but preferred that France and not America armed Israel. He also persuaded Canada to sell Israel 24 F86 Sabre Jets assembled in Canada and negotiations between Jerusalem and Ottawa got under way.

One of Golda's first assignments in the Foreign Ministry was to find out what preparations were being made in the ministry in case of war against Egypt. She discovered that the senior staff was not party to any strategic planning, at the direct order of the prime minister. She decided not to insist on her ministry's prestige and standing and preferred, for the time being, not to involve her senior staff in the plans that were being evolved elsewhere. Like most Israelis, she assumed that Israel would not initiate a preventive war against Egypt as long as she did not have the support of at least one major power. She was also afraid that in such a case Egypt would receive military equipment from Britain and political support from the United States. A week after she was sworn in as foreign minister, on June 25, 1956, a week after her confirmation by the Knesset, Ben-Gurion revealed to her and to Eshkol the details and dimensions of the arms deal with France.<sup>5</sup> On July 7, she briefed the Israel ambassador to Paris and a close personal friend for many years Yaacov Tsur of the nature of the arrangements made between the Defense Ministries of France and Israel and the understandings reached in the course of a conference held in Vermarre. She stressed the need for absolute secrecy and explained why even the senior staff in the Israel Embassy in Paris should not be in the picture. This was a strange request coming from a foreign minister to a senior ambassador regarding the most intimate military relations with the country to which he was accredited, but that was Ben-Gurion's specific order and she thought it should be scrupulously adhered to.<sup>6</sup> At the end of July, she traveled with Ben-Gurion, Dayan, and the French Ambassador to Israel Pierre Gilbert to the Kishon Harbor in Haifa Bay, to witness the arrival of 30 tanks and 60 tons of other equipment offloaded from a French LST. What

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 210.

<sup>6</sup> Yaacov Tsur, *Paris Diary—The Diplomatic Campaign in France 1953–1956*, Tel Aviv, 1968, p. 271.

the French ambassador to Israel was allowed to know was denied the Israeli diplomats in Paris.<sup>7</sup>

In their best tradition, the Israeli leaders acted in a conspiratorial manner. The cabinet was not informed of the planning, neither were the three Israeli ambassadors in the major capitals—Washington, London and Paris. If they suspected that something was being woven, they could not discern what was happening and this did not raise their standing in the eyes of the heads of the governments to whom they were accredited. Israel decided not to inform the United States about its thinking and plans. Golda was among the ten Israelis who were in on the secret. The others were, apart from Ben-Gurion—Peres, Dayan, Navon, Isser Harel, and a small number of their aids and some members of the General Staff. Even Yitzhak Rabin, then Commanding Officer Northern Command, was not informed of the planning at this early stage. Several days after his meeting with Golda, Ben-Gurion sent to Tsur clear-cut instructions confirming what the foreign minister had told him.<sup>8</sup>

It is difficult to assess properly Golda's thinking regarding France. She never liked that country or its people. Their language and culture were alien to her. The shameful behavior of most of the French people during World War II and the role many of them played in handing over tens of thousands of French Jews to the Nazis who sent them to the extermination camps were well-known to her and did not increase her admiration for them. True, France did redeem some of its standing in the eyes of Jews when it helped Aliyah B emissaries embark Holocaust survivors and now illegal immigrants in French ports on their way to Palestine. France was in no hurry to recognize Israel and relations between the two countries were quite chilly until 1954. In November of that year, the Algerian rebellion erupted against the French colonial rule, and the National Liberation Front (FLN) underground which enjoyed massive support from Nasser's Egypt brought the two countries closer. They now had a common enemy—Nasser. The two Socialist governments of France and Israel now found common language and interests and France undertook to sell arms to Israel without abandoning its traditional ties to the Arab world. As the Algerian rebellion intensified, so did the ties between Israel and France. And now, at the beginning of July 1956, Israel was asking itself a simple question—would it be Egypt who launched the second round or would Israel deal a preemptive strike. The two countries did not have to wait long for an answer. The one who dictated the pace of events was the president of Egypt.

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7 Dayan, *Milestones*, p. 219.

8 Tsur, *Paris Diary*, p. 271.

On July 26, 1956, Nasser decided to make a dramatic and fateful move. Facing tens of thousands of inflamed Egyptians in Alexandria, he proclaimed the nationalization of the Suez Canal. This was his response to the American decision to halt its promised support to build a new dam over the Nile at Aswan, Nasser's most ambitious project. Overnight, he became the hero of the Arab world and the top enemy of Israel, Britain and France. That very evening, British Prime Minister Eden was hosting the Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri Said at 10 Downing Street when he received the news. He was convinced that the "Hitler on the Nile" had to be toppled by military means. France had reached the same conclusion much earlier. Israel was waiting for an opportune moment to coordinate its moves with at least one major power, in this case it would be France.

Ben-Gurion and Dayan thought that the canal's nationalization would occupy Nasser for a long time and he would attempt to rehabilitate his ties with Britain and France as soon as possible. Only later, they assumed, would he turn his attention to Israel, now armed with Soviet weapons and blessings and the total support of the entire Arab world. The nationalization of the Suez Canal created a strange realignment of forces in the Middle East. Britain felt humiliated and threatened by the possible nationalization and later the loss of oil fields in the region and decided to resolve the problem by force and began to plan a military campaign against Egypt. It buried the "Alpha" plan and started military coordination with France. At this stage, some British planners were already thinking of the remote possibility of some coordination with Israel, albeit indirect. The idea of fighting Egypt with Israel's help did not capture the imagination of Eden and his ministers, neither did it create much excitement among Israel's leaders.

France had no compunction over military coordination with Israel. The military ties between the two countries reached such a level that in May 1956, during a routine meeting in Paris, the French Defense Minister Maurice Bourges-Maunory, asked Shimon Peres a leading question: how long would it take the IDF to cross the Sinai Peninsula and reach the Suez Canal. Peres, who understood the significance of this question, flew home at once and reported this to Ben-Gurion and Dayan. These two did not need much clarification to realize the import of this question. After Nasser had deeply humiliated Britain and France and by making them look and feel like third-rate powers, Israel could now expect to gain an umbrella from one or both of them if and when it decided to launch a preventive war against Egypt. In Israel's worsening political situation, its almost total regional and international isolation, this alternative was the best. Meanwhile Israel watched closely as Britain and France started moving troops and equipment to Cyprus during August and September 1956. The moves were overt and perhaps because of this they did not arouse American suspicions. The United States, already deep into Eisenhower's second presidential campaign, wanted

a peaceful resolution of the conflict. The joint Anglo-French planning called for landing troops at the northern exit of the Suez Canal near Port Said, a quick advance south and for holding this international waterway until an acceptable political solution would be found to protect their vital interests in the Canal. The British gave this plan the code name “Operation Musketeer”.

In the course of his frequent trips to Paris, Peres learned of the advanced state of Anglo-French military planning and systematically reported this to Ben-Gurion and Dayan. In early September, the French suggested to the British to seriously consider involving Israel in the war against Egypt. The British were highly skeptical, as were the Israelis. Israel’s attention was in those days focused on the seriously deteriorating situation along the Israel-Jordan Armistice Demarcation Line. Tensions mounted in view of the fear that large-scale retaliation on this front could elicit a major confrontation with Britain because of its defense treaty with Jordan. The reality was that there had been a decline in the British standing in Jordan, due partly to the ouster by King Hussein of the Commander of the Arab Legion General John Bagott Glubb in early 1956. In fact, public opinion in Israel assumed almost automatically that if war broke out, it will be against Jordan and not Egypt. The key question then was what would be the British reaction. The British were somewhat embarrassed. In their talks with the French, they suggested that the Israel-Jordan border should be kept “hot”, thereby eliciting British involvement and thus preserving Britain’s credibility in the Arab world, and this in the midst of British preparations to attack Egypt. Britain even thought of asking Iraq to send troops to Jordan. This possibility only intensified Ben-Gurion’s and Golda’s suspicion of Britain that was in any case very low.<sup>9</sup>

British perfidy was uppermost on their minds when Peres reported to them on September 25, 1956 the latest news from Paris. His trip was at the behest of Bourges-Maunory who wanted to discuss Israel’s role in a possible war against Egypt. In a secret meeting held in Bourges-Maunory’s country home, Peres proposed a high-level meeting of the most senior Israeli and French representatives to discuss how best to coordinate their actions. The French agreed and proposed

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<sup>9</sup> For the Sinai Campaign see Bar-Zohar, Ben-Gurion; Shimon Peres, *David’s Sling – The Arming of Israel*, London, 1970; Dayan, *Milestones*; Eban, *Autobiography*; Meir, *My Life*; Bar-Zohar, *Phoenix*, pp. 153–231; Michael Bar-Zohar, *Bridge Across the Mediterranean*, Tel Aviv, 1964; David Ben-Gurion, *The Sinai War*, Tel Aviv, 1959; Mordechai Bar-On, *Challenge and Quarrel, The Road to Sinai—1956*, Beer Sheva, 1991; Mordechai Bar-On, *The Gates of Gaza—Israel’s Foreign and Defense Policy 1955–1957*, Tel Aviv, 1992; Moshe Dayan, *Diary of the Sinai Campaign*, Tel Aviv, 1965; Tsur, *Paris Diary*; Golani, *There Will be War this Summer*; Yossef Evron, *Suez 1956—A New Outlook*, Tel Aviv, 1986; Benjamin Pinkus, *From Ambivalence to an Unwritten Alliance, Israel, France and French Jewry 1947–1957*, Sede Boker, 2005; Zaki Shalom, *David Ben-Gurion, the State of Israel and the Arab World 1949–1956*, Sede Boker, 1995.

that Ben-Gurion would head the Israeli delegation. Peres had reservations. At this early stage, he did not want to involve the highest authority of Israel and suggested to Ben-Gurion that he send a ministerial delegation to Paris. He reported to Ben-Gurion that “he was under the impression that the British and the French were determined to go jointly to war against the nationalization of the Suez Canal even though there was no formal decision yet...France was interested that Israel would be a full and equal partner in this operation, but that Britain was opposed to any direct cooperation or even contact with Israel, or at least has reservations...I reported to Ben-Gurion (wrote Peres later) of Bourges-Maunory’s agreement to a meeting at the highest possible level...This would be a secret diplomatic meeting whose conclusions would be subject to the approval of the two governments”.<sup>10</sup>

In a meeting with the Mapan and Achdut Ha’avodah ministers who were only then informed of the secret negotiations with France, a decision was made to send a high-level delegation headed by the foreign minister and including Dayan, Peres, Moshe Carmel (minister of transport, member of Achdut Ha’avodah, who spoke fluent French) and several aides. On the eve of their departure, the members of the delegation were painstakingly instructed by Ben-Gurion. In order to ensure that his instructions would be scrupulously followed on September 27, he sent Golda a letter detailing what she should tell the French. She was asked to tell them that Israel would not initiate war alone and would participate in an operation only if Britain and France agreed to Israel being a full partner and that Britain guaranteed that Jordan and Iraq would not open a second front against Israel. If they did so, Israel would respond without fear of a British involvement on the side of Jordan. Ben-Gurion insisted that she clarify to the French in no uncertain terms that in case the proposed operation failed, this would be ruinous for Israel while for them it would merely mean damaging their prestige. If in the course of the war Jordan was occupied by another Arab country, Israel would have freedom of action in all territory west of the River Jordan. For its part, Israel would not attack other Arab countries save Egypt. Once the operation was concluded, Ben-Gurion asked for French support for the inclusion of the western coast of the Gulf of Eilat in Israeli territory and their commitment to ensure freedom of navigation through the Straits of Tiran and the Suez Canal (unless it would be destroyed). Israel also wanted to place the entire Sinai Peninsula under United Nations auspices. France was asked to inform the United States of the plan and seek its silent blessing. This was highly crucial for Israel, as it was paramount to insure that the U.S. would not impose economic or other sanctions on Israel in case of war. If and when a new regime was installed in Egypt, it would be required to enter into peace talks

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<sup>10</sup> Peres, *David’s Sling*, p. 160.

with Israel and sign a peace treaty with the Jewish state. Golda would head the delegation and be the chief spokesperson and no one was authorized to make any proposals without her prior approval. The military aspects would be handled only by the chief of staff. The final decision regarding whatever was proposed in the conference would be subject to cabinet approval. He also proposed that she ask what would happen in the case, which he thought a very remote possibility, of a Soviet attack on Israel.

The delegation took off on September 28 on board a French air force Neptune type plane used as a bomber by the American Air Force in the Second World War. They flew west over the Mediterranean Sea towards Tunisia and spent the night at the French naval base in Bizerte. The identity of the passengers was withheld even from the base commander. In the course of a dinner in the officers' club, there were some snide remarks by French officers over the dumpy figure of the "secretary" of the delegation who looked to them like an old grandmother. Golda, who spoke no French, happily failed to understand the jokes and no one bothered to translate them to her. In any case, she was in no mood for jokes, certainly not at her expense, and she did not even taste much of the best of the French cuisine offered that evening. She was far more worried about Moshe Carmel, who during the flight had fallen into the bomb bay and broken some ribs. He bore his pain bravely and did not tell his colleagues of the accident. The next day they proceeded to Paris on board a French airforce DC-4 (the gift of President Truman to De Gaulle). When they arrived in Paris on September 29, they went directly to the home of Colonel Louis Manjin, Bourges-Maunory's senior aide, where the talks were held the next day. Golda ordered members of the Israeli delegation not to venture out to the streets of Paris. As expected, the only one who could be easily recognized, Moshe Dayan, defied her orders, and that annoyed her.

The meeting, which later became known as the St. Germaine Conference,<sup>11</sup> was opened by a presentation of the French Foreign Minister Antoine Pineau, who two days earlier had returned from London where he had met with the British leaders. Other French participants were Bourges-Maunory, Deputy Chief of Staff of the French Army General Maurice Challe and Abel Thomas, the director general of the French Ministry of Defense. Pineau explained to the Israelis the complexities of the British position and said that Britain had not yet come to terms with the idea of going to war and still harbored vague hopes of a peaceful resolution of the crisis. He added that it was clear to all that no one could expect any American military support. At best they would utter some pious declarations

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<sup>11</sup> On the conference in St. Germaine see Bar-On, "With Golda and Moshe Dayan at the St. Germaine Conference", *Ma'ariv*, 8 June 1973; Dayan, *Milestones*, pp. 231–240; Peres, *David's Sling*, pp. 141–161; Meir, *My Life*, pp. 215–261; Bar-On, *Gates of Gaza*.

favoring a peaceful settlement. If the operation failed, the one to emerge victorious would be Nasser, supported by the Soviet Union. Nasser, emboldened by his achievements, could then become an even greater danger to France in Algeria and to Israel in the Negev. Israel, declared Pineau, would have to look after its own vital interests and take any action it found necessary to defend them. Pineau then moved to the timetable. He assumed—wrongly, as it became apparent later on—that the United States would be absorbed in its election campaign, thus lacking an effective government for several weeks after the elections. This meant that any action must be taken until February 1957 the latest. He also estimated that President Eisenhower, certain to be re-elected, would seek new ways of co-existence with the Soviets. This could end hopes of the restoration of the status quo ante along the Suez Canal, because the Russians would not permit a return to the previous situation.

Golda, heeding Ben-Gurion's oral and written instructions, followed Pineau. She elaborated on Israel's fears of an impending Egyptian attack and her fears of British machinations that wanted—according to her—to unite Jordan with Iraq and undermine the regional balance of power and the status quo along Israel's eastern borders. She explained at length the relations between Israel and the United States and Israel's fears of Soviet intervention in case war did break out.

In the course of the conference, Peres arranged a meeting between Golda and the French Prime Minister Guy Mollet who uttered some platitudes regarding France's friendship towards Israel. Prior to the end of the discussions, Dayan outlined the Israeli plan of attack and detailed the amount of weapons Israel still required from France. Dayan also discussed what the IDF thought the British and French should do in Egypt, principally capturing the canal while Israel occupied all of Sinai.

On September 30, the delegation flew home, this time on the spacious DC4. Upon landing, they reported at once to Ben-Gurion. It was obvious that Golda was far from convinced that the French had made a nonreversible decision to go to war on the side of Israel. She thought that while the positions of the parties were fully presented, no concrete decisions were taken nor an agreed timetable for the operation arranged. She explained at length to Ben-Gurion why she thought the French were not yet ready, while Dayan explained why he thought they were. Later that evening she also reported on her trip to the Mapai and Achdut Ha'avo-dah ministers. Ben-Gurion was still hesitant regarding the entire scheme. Dayan, who pushed for war all along, pleaded with him not to raise any doubts until the planned visit of a French military delegation, something that was agreed upon in St. Germaine.

Golda was convinced that the conference had ended with no tangible results. She was used to concrete summations and this did not happen. In his memoirs,

Meir Amit, then head of military operations of the IDF general staff, noted that “Golda Meir, for example, came back from the visit with a negative recommendation. Dayan and Peres worked hard to persuade Ben-Gurion not to be overly impressed by the gloomy picture Golda painted”. It was decided that France would step up its arms shipments to Israel and that consultations between Tel Aviv and Paris would continue. At this stage it was evident that Britain was not yet ready to undertake military measures. France did not want to fight alone and preferred that Israel launch a unilateral military move against Egypt with no visible foreign help. Shimon Peres was deeply disappointed that the French prime minister, Guy Mollet, had not participated in the conference. Worse, he felt that he might have misled Ben-Gurion, causing him to be optimistic over France’s readiness to act. Golda’s frustration was also evident, in spite of a last-minute meeting between her and Mollet who tried to allay her fears. She thought that Peres was duping Ben-Gurion whom he constantly attempted to persuade that the French could be fully relied upon. If she had any doubts about Peres’ considerations and political judgment, the conference only served to strengthen them. The planned operation seemed to her not yet ripe. This would not be the first time Golda wondered about Peres’ character and judgment, but, above all, she failed to understand the secret of the influence he wielded over Ben-Gurion. Several days later she opposed a Peres trip to New York to meet with Pineau who was there attending United Nations Security Council discussions on the Suez Canal. The IDF Director of Military Intelligence General Yehoshafat Harkabi went instead. It was agreed that Harkabi would not brief Abba Eban of the planned operation against Egypt. Golda undertook to explain to Eban that Harkabi was in New York strictly to brief Pineau.

Michael Bar Zohar, Shimon Peres’ biographer, claimed in his book “The Phoenix” that, in contrast to Golda’s qualified attitude towards the achievements of the St. Germaine conference, “Peres was able to create a real alliance between France and Israel”. This claim does not hold water. The “alliance” collapsed several weeks later when Britain and France entered the Sinai War late and when, faced with American and Soviet threats in addition to a run on the sterling and on the French franc, they abandoned the battlefield and left Israel totally isolated. This would not be the first time France abandoned Israel. President De Gaulle would do so again in June 1967 during and after the Six Days War. In historic perspective, Golda’s senses were right. France could not be trusted.

A silent partner to her concerns was none other than Ben-Gurion. After the return of the delegation from France and hearing Golda’s report, Ben-Gurion was ready to reconsider the entire operation and was prepared to write a letter to Guy Mollet that if the British denied the French use of their air bases on Cyprus and did not participate in the war, the risk was not worth it. Ben-Gurion also wondered if



France's determination to fight alone was that strong, and even if France invaded Egypt alone, how long her troops would remain on the banks of the Suez Canal. Moreover, there was no certainty that the main goal of the operation, the toppling of the Nasserite regime, would be achieved. But Moshe Dayan was able to deter Ben-Gurion from writing this letter. He wholeheartedly supported war at all costs in order to remove what he estimated to be the most serious and real danger to Israel's existence and to free Israel from the noose which was tightening around her neck. Ben-Gurion shelved the letter, refrained from giving public expression to his concerns and ordered continued preparations for the war while he watched the developments along the border with Jordan with growing concern.

While Dayan and Peres continued to maintain the contacts with the French, Golda focused on diplomatic contacts to prevent a deterioration of the situation along the Jordanian border. A massive Israel retaliatory raid on the Kalkilyah police station in the West Bank on October 11 was very costly and resulted in a large number of Israeli casualties. King Hussein demanded the immediate despatch of two divisions to Jordan from Iraq. This information was transmitted to Israel by the British charge d'affaires in Tel Aviv and Israel now attempted to prevent this dangerous move. On October 15, 1956, Golda addressed the Knesset and said, among other things: "The entry of Iraqi units to Jordan is part of a plan aimed at advancing Iraq's territorial ambitions and could lead to a far-reaching transformation of the regional situation. This poses a direct threat to Israel's territorial integrity on the part of an Arab state that invaded her territory in 1948 and subsequently refused to sign an armistice agreement with her. True to its obligations to her people, the Government of Israel is determined to confront this threat".<sup>12</sup> Israel clearly separated the Jordanian issue and the Egyptian one. Golda delivered this message to the British diplomat in a meeting she held with him in Jerusalem a day earlier. The French allayed Israel's concerns, saying that Britain had no intention of acting against Israel unless Israel attacked Jordan.

Meanwhile, the flow of arms from France continued by sea and the Israeli public was expecting an attack on Jordan. At the same time, in the United Nations Security Council which met to discuss the crisis created by the nationalization of the Suez Canal, the Soviet Union vetoed a draft resolution calling for the internationalization of that waterway, so the British and French realized that the UN would not provide any solution. As for Israel, she did not need additional proof that the UN was unable to resolve her deteriorating political and military problems. On October 17, a letter arrived from Guy Mollet inviting Ben-Gurion to come to the French capital to discuss new Anglo-French ideas. The invitation

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<sup>12</sup> Address in the Knesset, 13 October 1956.

was accompanied by a military plan in which Israel would launch the war by an extensive military action in the Sinai. Britain and France would then attempt to separate the warring parties, Israel would agree and Egypt would reject an Anglo-French ultimatum calling for a cease-fire and would continue fighting. This would be the sign for the two powers to intervene forcefully and occupy the canal under the pretext that they wanted to protect this vital waterway. Eden thought that he could swallow this bitter pill because Britain would be seen in a positive light as a peacemaking country and this could even be accepted by the United States.

That evening Ben-Gurion invited Golda, Eshkol, Dayan and Peres to discuss the invitation from Paris. He harbored many doubts, with which Golda and Eshkol concurred. But Dayan and Peres pressed him to travel to Paris and after many hours of soul-searching, he decided to go. On the way to Hatsor military airfield, from where he was about to take off for Paris, his doubts grew and he almost cancelled the trip at the last moment. His main concern was fear of British perfidy. Dayan and Peres could barely convince him to board the plane and embark on the journey. He feared that the plans giving Israel the role of the colonial powers' messenger boy would place his country in a highly negative light. Dayan argued that in any case, sooner or later, Israel would have to attack Egypt, so it was preferable to do so with partners rather than alone. Ben-Gurion may have feared that Britain was bound to use the war in Egypt to enable Iraq to annex Jordan and threaten Israel. Golda also had similar concerns. Both could not yet get rid of the anti-British phobia that haunted them from the recent past and refused to trust the British. In retrospect, they were right. Eden's leadership was shaky and uncertain and his dealing with the crisis was erratic and faulty. Several weeks after the war, he was forced to resign as prime minister and abandon politics for good after decades of a brilliant career.

Although Britain and France would be represented by their foreign ministers at the forthcoming conference, Ben-Gurion decided not to include Golda Meir in the delegation to the meeting that would finally determine whether Israel was going to war. He included Dayan, Peres and several senior aides. He may have feared her doubtful attitude towards the entire scheme. He may have thought that she would have no role to play in purely military discussions. In her memoirs, she does not even mention the conference held in Sevres on October 22–24, 1956 and dealt with the final preparations for the war.<sup>13</sup> France was represented by Mollet, Pineau and Bourges-Maunoury, Britain was represented by Foreign Secretary

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**13** On the Sevres Conference see Bar-Zohar, Ben-Gurion, pp. 1232–1254; Peres, *David's Sling*, pp. 166–170; Dayan, *Milestones*, pp. 252–266. See also Bar-On, *Challenge and Quarrel*, pp. 270–276; Bar-On, *Gates of Gaza*, pp. 276–294; Bar-Zohar, *Phoenix*, pp. 210–222; Pinkus, *From Ambivalence to Unwritten Alliance*, pp. 592–602.

Selwin Lloyd whose behavior only showed how repulsed he was by the entire matter and the bitter pill Britain had to swallow. Ben-Gurion surprised the gathering when he presented his vision for a new Middle East after Nasser's defeat. The fall of Egypt could bring about Jordan's disintegration and the partition of its territory between Israel that would get the West Bank and Iraq with the East Bank. Iraq would then settle the Arab refugees in its territory. Assuming that Britain and France toppled Nasser, a new map of the Middle East could be drawn with Israel playing a central role. He also spoke of Israeli presence in Sharm el-Sheikh and other key points in Sinai and went on to mention the possibility of Israel annexing parts of South Lebanon in addition to the West Bank where the local population would be given autonomous rule under Israel. The vision was far from realistic. Ben-Gurion may have failed to understand that Britain and France had reached the end of the road as colonial powers and could no longer impose new arrangements in the Near East, nor for that matter anywhere else, as they had done in the past. Gone were the days when Britain and France could divide the Middle East among themselves as they had done during World War I. The other participants listened politely to Ben-Gurion's vision and made no comments.

When he dealt with military matters, Ben-Gurion was on more concrete ground. He preferred a combined simultaneous attack on Egypt by the well-coordinated forces of Britain, France and Israel, rather than leaving the first move to the IDF. But the British insisted that Israel fire the first shot and accepted Dayan's plan that the first phase would consist of the IDF dropping paratroopers in the Mitla Pass. This would provide the excuse which enabled Britain and France to present Israel and Egypt with an ultimatum to cease fire. The paratroopers drop in Mitla could be described and excused as a major retaliatory raid instead of a major war.

The Sevres conference ended with a formal agreement and a timetable that committed Israel to act alone for at least 48 hours, during which time it would confront not only the Egyptian army but also the United States and the entire world. The French calmed Ben-Gurion when he voiced fears regarding a possible Soviet intervention, saying that the Russians at the time were busy in Poland restoring law and order following unrest there and preparing to put down an open rebellion in Hungary. Ben-Gurion was finally convinced that while the British could not be trusted, the French would be faithful to their pledges. Since France promised Israel to supply it with an aerial umbrella in the shape of French air squadrons to protect its skies and cities, they were really serious about defending Israel. The die was cast and Israel's leaders returned home to give the necessary final orders to the IDF and to prepare the nation for war against Egypt, an enemy that few Israelis thought would be the target. Ben-Gurion began consultations to obtain the cabinet's approval for this operation, discussed it with the heads of the

opposition and received Begin's blessings. The cabinet approved the campaign on Sunday October 28, a day before "Operation Kadesh" was due to start.

While the final preparations were completed in the Office of the Prime Minister and the Defense Ministry, not to mention the IDF High Command, life in the Foreign Ministry went on leisurely as though nothing was about to happen. The senior staff was not informed of the plans. The annual consultations of Israel's ambassadors in Washington, London, Paris and Moscow with the heads of the ministry that normally were held on the eve of the United Nations General Assembly session took place in Jerusalem as planned, although late since the opening of the General Assembly was postponed due to the American presidential elections. Ambassadors Eban, Tsur, Eilat and Avidar spent four days discussing a possible war against Jordan and Iraq and the need to mobilize public opinion for such an eventuality. In any case, public opinion in Israel and abroad was not prepared for the possibility of war against Egypt. The mood in the ministry was surrealistic. Several officials felt that something was afoot, but they did not have the courage to ask the foreign minister. For her part, she did not volunteer any information, which strengthened the feeling some of them held that Golda was relegated to a marginal place instead of being among the top decision makers. She had no intention to correct that image.

Among the few who knew what took place was Yaacov Tsur, Israel's ambassador in Paris. Although he did not attend the Sevres or the St. Germaine conferences and expressed his anger at being excluded from them, which he saw as a major slight to his position, he felt the atmosphere was different. On October 24, Golda told him: "I know we are ready and that war was inevitable, but today I do not envy Ben-Gurion. This is a decision and he has personal responsibility for this operation".<sup>14</sup> Perhaps she still thought that Ben-Gurion was being driven to war by Dayan and Peres and that he would lead Israel to a fateful adventure without consulting the cabinet and heads of the other political parties. Soon he did just that. Deep in her heart, she knew there was no other way to avoid this fatal move. She was convinced Israel had to break the siege and restore the regional balance of power that tilted against her since the autumn of 1955. It is odd that a month earlier she told the American columnist Drew Pearson that "for Israel to initiate war against Egypt there will be need to replace the prime minister, the foreign minister, the Knesset and perhaps the spirit of the entire nation".<sup>15</sup> Why did she change her mind within a month? Primarily because she thought there was no other way to break the deadlock. She knew that Israel could not withstand a

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<sup>14</sup> Tsur, *Paris Diary*, p. 295.

<sup>15</sup> *Washington Post*, quoted in E.L.M. Burns, *Between Arabs and Israelis*, London, 1962, p. 165.

prolonged siege. The tightening noose would curtail immigration, encourage emigration, prevent investments, destroy tourism and could even make Israel an ephemeral and temporary factor in the Middle East and the world at large. Her solid common sense led her to understand that the partners could not be trusted, and that included France. But at least the French fulfilled their commitments and supplied Israel with massive quantities of weapons and were prepared to provide Israel with an aerial umbrella in case of war. She had no illusions over Israel's ability to bring about a change in the hostile American attitude. As far as she was concerned, discussions in the United Nations were a waste of time, the Russians were highly dangerous and the British perfidious. This was a simplistic worldview, but from the Israeli point of view in the fall of 1956, it reflected the harsh reality. Finally, she knew that preparations for war were at such an advanced stage that if Israel pulled out with no visible cause, its credibility would be destroyed and no one could take her seriously in the future. It was with much sorrow that she came to the inevitable conclusion that Israel would have to fight. She admired Ben-Gurion and trusted his judgment. She was sure that if Ben-Gurion was convinced that there was no other way, he would do his utmost to avoid large-scale casualties and defend the homeland.

Since she could always discern between the essence and the marginal in any subject, she knew that an unequivocal decision had to be taken. Those who cannot decide are doomed to failure. She expressed these thoughts during a lunch she tended at her residence on October 26, 1956 for Hubert Beuve-Mery, the highly respected editor of the French daily "Le Monde" who came to see her accompanied by Ya'acov Tsur. The discussion focused on the fate of Czechoslovakia. What would have happened if Benes, the president of that country had decided to fight for his country's defense in 1938? The editor of "Le Monde" said that Prague would have been bombed, but Czechoslovakia had the military capability to withstand the Germans until the Russians would have come to their aid. Golda replied: "You see, often governments take upon themselves heavy historic responsibility not only when they make a decision, but also when they avoid taking a decision at the right time".<sup>16</sup>

She spent the weekend in Revivim with her daughter, son-in-law and grandchildren. She could not divulge to them what was going to take place the coming Monday, but hinted to the members of the kibbutz that it might be a good idea to dig trenches. On her way back to Jerusalem she noticed long lines of men near bus stations waiting for transport to their bases. The call-up was at its height. On Saturday night she met the senior staff of the Foreign Ministry, swore them

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<sup>16</sup> Tsur, Paris Diary, pp. 295–296.

to secrecy and described for them the situation without going into unnecessary details regarding the roles of France and Britain in the war that was about to start in 48 hours. It was obvious to the minister and her staff that one of their main tasks would be the creation of a favorable international public opinion. It was an impossible mission since public opinion was not properly prepared. In what light would Israel be perceived worldwide, especially in the United States? What would the Jews say, they asked? She had no answers.

The next day she traveled to Tel Aviv to her office in the Kiryah. This would be her base during the war. She felt she had to be close to Ben-Gurion who directed the war from the Defense Ministry, although most of the time he was confined to his sickbed. He had caught a bad cold during the flight back from Paris, his temperature rose and he was ordered by his doctors to take to his bed.

The operation began as planned on Monday, October 29 in the early hours of the evening, when a paratroopers unit parachuted near the Mitla Pass in Western Sinai. In the next two days, Israel fought alone and waited for the British and French to make their moves. But they delayed presenting their ultimatum to Israel and Egypt and moving their troops. They did so only in the evening of October 30. Israel's representatives in London and Paris who had no knowledge what it was all about were horrified. The charge d'affairs of the Israel embassy in London was summoned to 10 Downing Street. Anthony Eden found it hard to believe that the Israeli diplomat had no idea of what he wanted from him and mainly from his government. Gershon Avner, the Israeli diplomat, also failed to understand why his frantic call to his foreign minister was answered by her patiently and coolly requesting that he calm down.

One superpower knew exactly how it was going to act—the United States. On Monday, October 29, a meeting was already held in the White House in which an angry president announced that his country would fulfill its obligations to Egypt. He had no fear that he would not be re-elected because of this. Secretary of State Dulles added an ominous threat. If the American voter chased Eisenhower from the White House, “a wave of anti-Semitism in America is likely to take place”.<sup>17</sup> America's leaders were determined to halt the war at once and called for an immediate meeting of the United Nations Security Council. On October 30, Britain and France vetoed an American draft resolution that called for an end to the fighting and the withdrawal of Israeli troops from Sinai. This was the first time in the history of the United Nations that two Western powers vetoed an American proposal. The Western front cracked at this fateful hour. The United States, using a

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<sup>17</sup> Steven Spiegel, *The Other Arab-Israeli Conflict—Making America's Middle East Policy from Truman to Reagan*, Chicago, 1985, p. 74.

1950 General Assembly resolution called “United for Peace”, called for an emergency session of the General Assembly. The American moves were too quick for Israel, France and Britain. They did not think that America would act so speedily and decisively. At the start of the special session, Abba Eban delivered one of his finest speeches, explaining what had led Israel to war. Although he was not happy with the moves, most of which he was not even aware of, he defended his government’s policies in his best oratorical skills. But his words did not allay America’s anger or change her policy and certainly did not appease the furious president who railed mainly against the policies of his two allies, charging them with collusion. Eisenhower not only limited his criticism to the policies of the two governments, but derisively sneered at their inept military moves.<sup>18</sup>

In the course of the first week of November, the IDF completed the occupation of the Sinai Peninsula and the Gaza Strip. The forces halted 15 kilometers from the Suez Canal. As expected, Egypt rejected their ultimatum and finally, much later than agreed upon in Sevres, the British and French bombed Egyptian airfields and landed forces near Port Said on November 5. Ben-Gurion and Eisenhower exchanged letters. The president, who was re-elected by a landslide, demanded of Ben-Gurion an immediate cease-fire and total unconditional withdrawal from all of Sinai. He did not openly threaten, but hinted at dire consequences for Israel if she failed to heed his demands. The situation worsened when Egypt blocked the Suez Canal while the British and French forces advanced along this waterway. It was obvious that Israel alone would bear the brunt of America’s anger. Israel, Britain and France announced their acceptance of the UN demand for withdrawal but gave no timetable. On November 5, another ominous turnaround occurred. A message arrived from Moscow signed by the prime minister of the Soviet Union, Nikolai Bulganin, in which he made a veiled threat about the very existence of Israel. Bulganin wrote to Ben-Gurion that Russia possessed long-range missiles and that Israel’s leaders were playing with their country’s future. The Russians also recalled their ambassador from Tel Aviv. In separate messages to Britain and France, Bulganin hinted of the possibility of firing Soviet missiles on Israel, hoping that would convince Ben-Gurion to end hostilities. The Russians made sure the messages would be made public even before they reached their destinations.

Israel’s reply was drawn up by Ya’acov Herzog, the Director of the American Division of the Foreign Ministry, who was loaned to Ben-Gurion for the duration of the war. Apart from Golda Meir, he was the only one in the ministry who was privy to all the top-level consultations. Herzog, the son of the Chief Rabbi of Israel,

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 76.

was a brilliant man, with a fertile mind, possessed of vast knowledge in Judaism, history, diplomacy and had first-class writing and speaking abilities. Above all he was a quick drafter and Ben-Gurion fully trusted his analysis and understanding of events. When the messages arrived, Ben-Gurion sought to gain time, but to no avail. On November 6, the Soviets completed quelling the Hungarian uprising and could now turn all their energies to rescue their ally Egypt. They proposed to the Americans a joint plan of action against Israel, France and Britain, but Washington responded by saying their offer was “totally unacceptable”. However, the United States used the Soviet proposal to pressure the three partners to the war to yield to her demands. The saving formula was found when the General Assembly voted to adopt a Canadian resolution calling for the creation of a United Nations Emergency Force (UNEF) that would enter those areas from where the Israeli, British, and French troops would withdraw. But the Americans did not rely on UNEF only. In a secret message to Golda Meir, Herbert Hoover Jr, the acting secretary of state in the absence of John Foster Dulles who had undergone an operation for the removal of a cancerous growth, wrote that his “government envisioned total rupture of relations between Israel and the United States and a strong movement in the United Nations to expel Israel unless it withdraws from Egypt”.<sup>19</sup> On November 5, the British and French decided to accept the cease-fire even before they had completed their mission of occupying the entire Suez Canal zone. The General Assembly adopted the resolution creating UNEF to monitor the cease-fire and to be deployed in Egyptian territory that was to be vacated by the foreign troops. What Golda had feared all along came to pass—Israel remained isolated.

In spite of this development, Ben-Gurion decided not to give up and dispatched Golda Meir and Shimon Peres to Paris to find out what the French would do in case the Soviets realized their threats against Israel. They flew on the night of November 6–7 and reached Paris at 6 am, exhausted from a sleepless night and from the huge tension of the past several weeks. From the airport they headed directly to the French Defense Ministry for a meeting with Bourges-Maunoury and Pineau. Of these two, Pineau took the Soviet threat more seriously and stressed the many rumors spread by the Russians that they were making preparations to intervene on the side of Egypt. He estimated that France possessed no means for anti-missile defense. For his part, Bourges-Maunoury claimed that the Soviet threat was a ploy and part of a war of nerves. But Pineau added that France could not undertake to protect Israel’s cities and villages. France would continue to supply Israel with weapons but said the Soviet threat must be taken seriously. From the Defense Ministry, Golda went to see Prime Minister Guy Mollet.

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<sup>19</sup> Terrence Robertson, *Crisis—The Inside Story of the Suez Conspiracy*, New York, 1964, p. 278.



The meeting with him only confirmed her worst fears—Israel could not rely on France in case of Soviet intervention. The French used the opportunity, however, to hint to Israel their readiness to help Israel develop its independent nuclear deterrent capability. This was the second time in which the possibility of Franco-Israeli cooperation in the field of nuclear energy was discussed. The first was an exchange of ideas between Peres and Bourges-Maunoury during the Sevres conference. But this was of little solace. Golda left her meetings depressed, as noted by Yaacov Tsur. Now Israel faced the bitter reality it had not envisioned even in its worse dreams. Israel was abandoned by its two allies under Soviet threat and brutal American pressure. The alliance with France barely held for five weeks. After a brief meeting with Tsur, she and Peres returned to Israel to tell Ben-Gurion that “we are alone”. This hasty trip depressed her so much that she did not even mention it in her memoirs.<sup>20</sup>

Her report did not deter Ben-Gurion from proclaiming in the Knesset on November 7, in the course of his victory speech in which he recounted the IDF achievements, that the “Armistice Agreement with Egypt was dead and buried and will not revive. It died after the Egyptian dictator abused it for many years”. At the conclusion of his address he declared the establishment of the third Israeli kingdom and hinted that the IDF would remain on the islands of Tiran and Sanafir that according to Greek sixth century sources were once part of the old Jewish kingdom of Yotveta, but he refrained from announcing that Israel would formally annex Sinai. He added that Israel “would not permit the stationing of foreign troops on its territory and that the Armistice Demarcation Lines ceased to exist”. A jubilant Knesset voted full confidence in the prime minister of Israel.<sup>21</sup>

Golda thought this speech was in response to the Soviet threat. Years later she recalled that she thought that Ben-Gurion really believed that “we could stay in Sinai and Gaza. None of us, including Ben-Gurion, did not take into account that the Soviets would react as they did”.<sup>22</sup> If this was their thinking, it was faulty. They had to take into account a sharp Soviet reaction in addition to the anticipated American one. It was obvious how wrong they were when they failed to consult the experts and mainly Israel’s Sovietologists. Lack of advance planning bordered on recklessness. Peres thought the speech was aimed at the purpose of negotiations. Ben-Gurion took his own words literally, so did the Americans and the Russians. Several hours after the speech, a blistering message arrived from Eisenhower in which he warned Israel that failure to withdraw from Sinai could

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<sup>20</sup> On the trip to Paris see Peres, *David’s Sling*, p. 175; Tsur, *Paris Diary*, p. 307.

<sup>21</sup> Address in the Knesset, 7 November 1956.

<sup>22</sup> Brecher, *Foreign Policy System of Israel*, p. 283.

lead to Israel being branded as violating the United Nations principles and its instructions. The president added: “I need not assure you the huge interest the United States has in your country, not to mention the various principles in our policy aimed at helping Israel in a variety of ways...it will be highly regrettable to my countrymen if Israel’s policy on such a grave matter that relates to the entire world will harm in any way the friendly cooperation between our two countries”.<sup>23</sup>

Ben-Gurion’s uncompromising position caused an international panic and there were thoughts that the world was on the verge of a third world war. The whole world pointed an accusing finger at Israel. After accepting the cease-fire, the British and French announced that they would begin withdrawal even before UNEF would be deployed. Israel was faced with an even graver decision. Irrespective of his speech to the Knesset a day earlier, Ben-Gurion realized Israel would have to withdraw from Sinai, and the question he faced now was what the conditions for its withdrawal would be and what political gains could be gotten in return for its withdrawal. Few in Israel demanded that the IDF remain forever in Sinai. A number of ministers, especially Sapir and Aranne, demanded that Ben-Gurion announce at once Israel’s readiness for unconditional withdrawal. At the last moment a saving formula was found. Eban informed the UN Secretary General that Israel would withdraw once appropriate arrangements would be made with UNEF.

Ben-Gurion was forced to yield, mainly because he could not assess the nature and dimensions of the Soviet threat. In a dramatic night session of the cabinet, while the people of Israel were waiting impatiently for a radio address by the prime minister, Ben-Gurion said: “If they decided to bomb, they will do so even if we go down on our bended knees or lie on the floor”. He probably knew that the Soviet threats were idle, but if necessary they would use their infantry divisions. Eban’s formula was adopted by the cabinet and at midnight, with Golda standing next to him, Ben-Gurion broadcast to the nation and read the text of his messages to Eisenhower and Bulganin. He did not use the word “withdrawal” but said Israel would honor and implement the UN resolutions. He wanted to make the point that Israel was doing so in response to America’s request and not because of Soviet threats. In this way the Americans would be seen as partly responsible for Israel’s defense. This check would be served to Washington in May 1967. When he finished reading his radio statement he said: “Good God.” Golda muttered: “Why do we deserve this”.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> On the correspondence between Ben-Gurion, Eisenhower and Bulganin, see Ben-Gurion, *Sinai War*, pp. 219–232.

<sup>24</sup> Netanel Lorch, “Ben-Gurion and the Great Powers in Operation Kadesh”, *Monthly Review* 33/10–11, 1986, p. 45.

When the guns fell silent, the time came for a political salvage operation designed to reward Israel with some political gains following the military victory that the country could not exploit. Israel faced the entire world alone. The Sevres arrangements collapsed like a house of cards. Now the struggle was in the hands of the professional diplomats and not the soldiers. They began a rearguard battle in an arena where Israel faced an automatic majority of 65 nations, while four voted with her and the rest abstained. The wartime partners, Britain and France, shunned beleaguered Israel and sought to mend their own destroyed economies and political ties with the United States. Now began a four months diplomatic struggle conducted in New York and Washington. The conductor was Abba Eban, but he labored under the close direction of Golda Meir who was sent from Jerusalem by Ben-Gurion, theoretically to head Israel's delegation to the United Nations, but her real mission was to assure that the Israeli diplomats in New York and Washington would not yield quickly to American pressures and make major concessions. Ben-Gurion did not fully trust the Foreign Ministry and suspected that some of the diplomats were still afflicted with what he called the "Sharett Syndrome". Her presence was required to strengthen their confidence. He also correctly thought that Golda had nothing important to do in Israel as the diplomatic struggle was in the United States. Perhaps he did not fully trust Eban's judgment and put a monitor to watch over him. She was busy in New York while Eban worked both in New York and in Washington wearing his two hats. Golda, who was not yet convinced of the need for the operation in the manner in which it was carried out and certainly did not trust Israel's allies, remained in New York most of the time, maintaining contact with foreign ministers and UN ambassadors. She argued, struggled and attempted to persuade them as well as American Jews, the media and of course the heads of the Eisenhower administration.<sup>25</sup> Her argument was simple. A conversation with the Canadian Foreign Minister Lester Pearson was an example of her stand: She told him that it was no longer possible to return to the status quo, that Israel could not permit the Egyptian army to re-establish its bases in Sinai and their return to the Gaza Strip and their re-activation of the Fedayun. Israel could not allow the Egyptians to take control again of the islands controlling the entrance to the Gulf of Aqaba, captured by Israel to open the Gulf of Eilat, its vital southern port. She argued that there was no guarantee that Nasser would permit Israeli shipping through the Suez Canal, the termination of the Fedayun attacks from the Gaza Strip or anything that would

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<sup>25</sup> Among those present was the British Foreign Secretary Selwin Lloyd, who later wrote that we covered much ground in our 17 November conversation. I found her the easiest Israeli to talk to since the resignation of Sharett. Dissatisfaction with the American foreign policy was our common denominator. See Selwin Lloyd, *Suez 1956—A Political Account*, London, 1978.

assure Israel's use of the Aqaba-Eilat Gulf. She warned Pearson that Nasser would extract so many conditions from UNEF as to make this force useless.<sup>26</sup>

By early December, the British and French forces completed their withdrawal from Sinai. Israel tarried and withdrew at a snail's pace, destroying every facility that had military value. Two weeks earlier, Golda met with the UN Secretary General Dag Hammarskjold who wanted to know Israel's withdrawal schedule. She avoided a direct answer and said there were many points that had to be studied carefully. At this stage, Hammarskjold refrained from pressing her. On December 5 she addressed the General Assembly and repeated Israel's position. In a tough speech she explained the roots of the Arab hostility towards Israel and asked: "What should be done now? Should we return to the Armistice regime that contained everything but peace and that was treated by Egypt with contempt and derision? Should Sinai once again be infested with Fedayun nests..."? In an unusual step, she cited the words of Egypt's delegate to the UN who some days earlier had called on the nations to live in freedom, friendship and equality and announced Israel's full agreement with these lofty ideals. The Dutch delegate was the only one to applaud her as she sat down. She understood that the game was sold in advance. The question was how long Israel could take to withdraw and at what price the withdrawal demands would entail.

In those days she lived in "Essex House", overlooking Central Park. From her hotel suite, from her office in the Israel Delegation to the UN on East 66<sup>th</sup> Street, in the UN corridors, she led the struggle. Her days and nights were full of meetings, official and unofficial breakfasts, lunches and dinners, endless appearances for Israel Bonds and the United Jewish Appeal in various cities, meetings with foreign ministers and heads of UN delegations, media interviews, both print and electronic. She often met Dag Hammarskjold and realized she had no common language with the cool and correct Swede who clung in an almost mystical way to the Armistice Agreements and General Assembly resolutions and was not prepared to listen to Israel's argument that the Armistice applied equally to Israel and the Arab states. He saw in Israel an agitating and dangerous element that was unwilling to behave according to rules of the game that might have been applicable to Scandinavia but not to the Middle East. He was convinced that the Arab world was allowed to behave according to different rules while much more was expected of Israel. Her description of him verged on hatred. She accused him of bias and prejudice and often of pure anti-Semitism. She failed to understand how the Swedes could remain neutral during the Second World War and benefit from it. She conveniently forgot that Sweden provided shelter to some 7,000 Danish

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<sup>26</sup> Robertson, *Crisis*, p. 278.

Jews smuggled to its shores from Nazi-occupied Denmark in 1943. Israel's experience with another Swede, the UN mediator Count Folke Bernadotte, had been bad. Another Swede, the head of the United Nations Truce Supervision Organization in the early 1950's, was hostile. As far as she was concerned, anyone who disagreed with Israel or was neutral was hostile, anti-Semitic or pro-Arab, usually all three together. She could not understand how decent people were not aware of Israel's fragile situation and share her concerns for its security. She knew there were other interests at stake, but for her the highest interest was the existence of Israel.

To relieve the tension, she attended theatrical shows, opera, concerts and films. The United States Secret Service provided her a bodyguard, a New York Jew who knew where every good Chinese restaurant was. Occasionally, she would disappear with close friends to taste heavenly Chinese cooking, not always observing the laws of Kashrut. Once Ben-Gurion phoned her on an urgent matter and she could not be found. When she returned to her hotel, she had to admit, somewhat sheepishly, that she had gone to the movies. But most of the time was dedicated to the diplomatic struggle. Ben-Gurion delineated the broad strategy, it was Eban who did the negotiations under the close scrutiny of the foreign minister, but he was the main contact with the Eisenhower administration and the United Nations Secretariat. In his memoirs, he barely mentions Golda's prolonged presence in New York from November 1956 to March 1957. At times, she felt she was not needed in New York and pleaded with Ben-Gurion to let her return to Israel. He insisted that she remain. Her general feeling in those days was that of a betrayed woman: everyone betrayed Israel and Golda took it personally.

Another major role she fulfilled at the time was to bolster American Jewry. The Jews in America were horrified when Israel struck in Sinai. They were not prepared for this eventuality and the war came as a thunder on a clear day. Eban's speech in the Emergency Session of the General Assembly which was broadcast live on all the networks contributed much to their understanding of the broad background for this operation. But Eban never succeeded in awakening their sentiments. Here Golda had clearly the upper hand. She threw herself fully to explain, raise morale, to cajole people to raise funds for beleaguered Israel. American Jews were also asked to pressure the Eisenhower administration mainly through Congress, to prevent economic sanctions from being imposed on Israel. As time passed, and the administration's stance became more anti-Israel, American Jews became alarmed and flooded their Congressmen and Senators with phone calls and letters to put pressure on Eisenhower and Dulles. But that was not enough. Both were adamant. Israel had to come up with new ideas to break the deadlock.

On December 29, Golda met with Dulles, who had recovered from his cancer operation, for a ninety-minute talk. She brought new proposals. Israel asked

Dulles to state that the United States supported freedom of navigation through the Straits of Tiran and would oppose the return of the Egyptians to the Gaza Strip. The United States was also asked to delay all the moves of the UN Secretary General and freeze all discussion over the future of Sinai and the Gaza Strip pending the achievement of an overall settlement. Dulles complained that Israel did not consult the United States prior to going to war and therefore he could not make any deal behind Hammarskjöld's back. While he did not reject out of hand some of Golda's proposals, he insisted that they be discussed with Hammarskjöld first and then in the General Assembly. The United States was not prepared to circumvent the United Nations. Since Golda knew very well Hammarskjöld's views she did not have to reiterate them to Dulles. He told her simply that Israel's only hope to continue to exist in the midst of a hostile Arab world was to improve its relations with the Arabs, but it had done little in this sphere. He added that since contacts between Israel and the United States were at best shaky, the administration did not know what where Israel's long-term intentions. If America would know clearly where Israel was headed, it could be more sympathetic. Golda tried in vain to present Israel's traditional position but Dulles was adamant. Israel must complete its total withdrawal from Sinai and the Gaza Strip or face a serious confrontation with the United States.<sup>27</sup>

In early February, Israel found itself still holding Sharm el-Sheikh and continued to demand guarantees for the freedom of navigation in the Straits of Tiran. Hammarskjöld insisted on an unconditional Israeli withdrawal from all the territories it still held. For that purpose, he had the General Assembly adopt a series of resolutions calling on Israel not to delay its withdrawal. He saw in Golda an intransigent and tough personality and felt it was his duty to bend her and her country to make concessions. He also thought that if there was need to impose economic sanctions on Israel, he would have American backing for such a radical move. He turned to Washington to gain its support and placed the Eisenhower administration in a major dilemma. The president wanted an Israeli withdrawal that would make America appear as friend of the Arabs and gain some political benefits from this support. He also wanted to make sure that the aggressors would not enjoy the fruits of their aggression, and as far as Israel was concerned, he thought it was an aggressor. But he understood that Congress would not allow him to impose sanctions on Israel without providing the Jewish state some promises or even assurances regarding the future. Israel was able to convince her many friends in the Senate, chiefly the majority and minority leaders, Senator Lyndon Johnson from Texas and Senator William Knowland from California, to oppose sanctions. Eisenhower

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<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 323.

therefore sought ways to reach an understanding with Israel to avoid an unpleasant confrontation with Congress in Washington and with endless discussions in the UN headquarters in New York. All this could take much time giving Israel a further chance to mobilize its friends. This could weaken America's position and strengthen that of the Soviet Union. The only way out was to offer Israel a deal.<sup>28</sup>

On February 11, 1957, Dulles handed Eban a memorandum in which he proposed a full Israeli withdrawal from the Gaza Strip and Sinai and an American declaration stating that the Gulf of Aqaba was an international waterway. The United States was prepared to offer, together with other maritime nations, recognition of the freedom of passage through this waterway. Israel demanded more detailed and binding assurances which Dulles refused to provide, forcing Israel to reject the memorandum. Ben-Gurion, who feared a break with America, summoned Eban to Jerusalem, leaving Golda behind in New York to decide what Israel was prepared to concede. This move only stressed the fact that it was Eban who conducted the negotiations with the United States and was in direct contact with and getting instructions from the prime minister. He did not always bother to inform the foreign minister of the details of the negotiations. In her despair, Golda once again went to see Lester Pearson, the Canadian foreign minister. She told him that Israel could not permit the return of the Egyptians to the Gaza Strip, but was prepared to withdraw if Gaza would be demilitarized or placed under United Nations regime. Pearson feared that Israel's obduracy could lead to sanctions and Golda responded that Israel weighed carefully the issue of sanctions and decided not to yield to this threat. Sanctions could cause huge suffering to her people, she said, but Israel could not surrender its right to self-defense. Whatever happened, the United Nations must realize that if driven to the wall and made to suffer greatly, in its despair Israel might have to fight again.<sup>29</sup>

This was an idle threat. Israel had no intention or capability to fight again. Finance Minister Eshkol was terrified that Israel's shaky economy would collapse and pressed Ben-Gurion to mend the deep rift with America. He was concerned not only about the future of the American economic aid to Israel, but feared even more that economic sanctions could mean the lifting of the tax exemption status for contributions to the United Jewish Appeal and halt the transfer of Israel Bonds money to Israel.

Eisenhower now decided to turn directly to the American people and in a live radio and television broadcast he once again called on Israel to place its trust on the United Nations. This call was made over the heads of Congress. Ben-Gurion

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<sup>28</sup> On the Israeli diplomacy see Eban, *Autobiography*, pp. 207–257.

<sup>29</sup> Robertson, *Crisis*, p. 325.

now realized that he would have to compromise. The next phase was to find the redeeming formula. The French Foreign Minister Pineau was mobilized for that effort and proposed to Israel that the latter would proclaim in the United Nations its readiness to fully withdraw from Sinai and the Gaza Strip, in return for certain “assumptions and expectations” that in case of interference with freedom of navigation, Israel would have the right to exercise its right of self-defense given to all sovereign nations and would have the right to return to Gaza if the Fedayun resumed operations from there. America preferred that the French pressured Ben-Gurion. Israel’s announcement in the United Nations would be accompanied by an American statement that confirmed these “assumptions and expectations”. Pineau met with Golda several times, as she later reported to the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee, and told her that while France did not wish to put pressure on Israel, he thought this was the best arrangement available. She admitted that this deal was the result of an American-French dialogue. Ben-Gurion did not want to strain ties with France fearing it might stop selling arms to Israel, leaving the latter totally isolated and defenseless.

The first draft of the statement she was to make was written by Ambassador Eban, Minister Shiloah and the legal adviser of the State Department Herman Flieger. It was taken by Eban to Dulles’s residence and the Secretary of State added in his own handwriting the key points of the statement to be made by Henry Cabot Lodge, the American delegate to the United Nations, immediately after Golda’s statement. That speech did not contain a precise promise that the United States would support a UN regime in Gaza and oppose the return of Egypt to the Strip. Without notifying the Israelis, Pineau showed the draft of Golda’s and Lodge’s statement to Hammarskjöld. The Secretary General noted that in the agreement over Gaza which contained the words “initial takeover” by a UN force, the word “initial” was crossed by ink. That evening Hammarskjöld hosted a dinner the French Prime Minister Guy Mollet who told him that the Israeli statement was meant to prevent the return of the Egyptians to the Gaza Strip. Hammarskjöld responded by saying that from the point of view of international law this statement was invalid since the Armistice Agreement granted Egypt rights in Gaza. France’s Ambassador to the United States, Herve Alphand, said that the UN would have to guarantee that the Egyptians would not return to Gaza. Hammarskjöld said this was impossible. He may even have told Lodge the same.<sup>30</sup>

On March 1, preparations for the final act of this six-months drama were completed. Golda’s and Lodge’s statements were approved by the cabinet in Jerusalem. Golda studied her script carefully. She was told that Dulles and Lodge went over

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30 Brian Urquhart, Hammarskjöld, London, 1972, p. 210.



every comma and that Lodge would read the statement coordinated with hers. She rose from her seat, walked slowly to the rostrum and made her statement:

The Government of Israel is now in a position to announce its plans for full and prompt withdrawal from the Sharm el-Sheikh area and the Gaza Strip, in compliance with Resolution 1 of 2 February 1957. We have repeatedly stated that Israel has no interest in the strip of land overlooking the Western coast of the Gulf of Aqaba. Our sole purpose there has been to ensure that, on the withdrawal of Israeli forces, continued freedom of navigation will exist for Israeli and international shipping in the Gulf of Aqaba and the Straits of Tiran.

She then detailed the “assumptions and expectations” upon which the Israeli government based itself, including those relating to the freedom of navigation in the straits and that the Egyptians would not return to the Gaza Strip. She cited extensively from statements made by President Eisenhower and the maritime nations regarding freedom of navigation. At the end of her speech, deviating from her written speech, facing the packed General Assembly hall, she said:

May I now add these few words to States in the Middle East area and, more specifically, to the neighbors of Israel...Can we from now on—all of us—turn a new leaf and, instead of fighting with each other, can we all, united, fight poverty and disease and illiteracy? Is it possible for us to put all our efforts and all our energy into one single purpose, the betterment and progress and development of all our lands and all our people.<sup>31</sup>

These moving words elicited much applause. But when the applause died down and she returned to her seat to listen with much attention to Lodge’s statement, she was tense. Lodge rose to speak and in one stroke the entire understanding collapsed. In the first sentence of his speech, he stunned the Israelis by saying that the future of the Gaza Strip would have to be determined in the framework of the Israel-Egypt Armistice Agreement. However, he repeated the agreed text regarding the freedom of navigation in the Straits of Tiran. He was followed by the delegate of Egypt, Foreign Minister Mahmud Fawzi, who said that everything that had been said here or in any other international forum did not bind Egypt and could not affect its full sovereignty over Sinai and Palestinian rights in the Gaza Strip. It was evident that Egypt had given no commitments either to Washington or to the United Nations. At the end of the session Hammarskjöld rose to inform the Assembly that General Burns, the chief of staff of UNEF, would meet at once with General Dayan to go over the final details of Israel’s withdrawal from the Gaza Strip. The game of illusions was over, but not as anticipated. Israel and mainly its foreign minister felt betrayed directly by the United States and indirectly by

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<sup>31</sup> Statement to the United Nations General Assembly, 1 March 1957.

France that played a key role in achieving this understanding. France's role in this game did not add more points to her in Golda's eyes. She had in any case never trusted the French, their leaders and their policy. Unknown to the Israelis, Dulles met on March 1, 1957 in the morning in Washington with representatives of nine Arab states and sought to calm their fears saying that no promises or concessions were given to Israel in return for its agreement to withdraw. The United States, he said, rejected an Israeli demand for "conditions" but did agree to the Israeli assumptions "regarding future American policy in and outside the UN".<sup>32</sup> Years later it was claimed that Israel could have asked the United States for a more precise commitment in case Egypt violated the understanding. But in the atmosphere of those days, Golda and Eban felt that was the best that could have been achieved. In the future, when she was prime minister, Golda insisted that any Israel-Egypt agreement would be backed up by precise American commitments. This was her policy mainly after the 1973 Yom Kippur War.

Golda looked as though the wind had gone out of her sails. Stunned and depressed, she returned to her hotel, sent her aides home and spent a sleepless night. In her memoirs she wrote: "There was nothing I could do or say. I just sat there biting my lip, not even able to look at the handsome Mr. Cabot Lodge while he pacified all those who had been so worried lest we refuse to withdraw unconditionally. It was not one of the finest moments of my life". The next day an Israeli diplomat asked how she felt. She told him that she had done her laundry all night, so at least something should be clean. Several days later, in a meeting with American Jewish leaders, she took out the original version of the speech Lodge was to deliver, with corrections in Dulles's handwriting, and said: "This is what Lodge should have read before the Assembly, but he said something totally different. What should we have done?" To sweeten the bitter pill, President Eisenhower sent a message to Ben-Gurion in which he promised that Israel would have no cause to regret its decision. He added: "Hopes and expectations based thereon were voiced by your Foreign Minister and others. I believe that it is reasonable to entertain such hopes and expectations and I want you to know that the United States, as a friend of all the countries of the area and as a loyal member of the United Nations, will seek that such hopes will not be in vain". On March 4, Golda reiterated Israel's commitment to withdrawal in the General Assembly and said that there arose a basic problem of interpreting the meaning of the Armistice

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<sup>32</sup> See Herman Finer, *Dulles Over Suez, The Theory and Practice of his Diplomacy*, Chicago, 1964, pp. 487–488; see also Ya'acov Herzog, "John Foster Dulles", in Yegar et al., eds., *The Foreign Ministry*; Dwight D. Eisenhower, *Waging Peace, 1956–1961: The White House Years*, Garden City 1965, and Dwight D. Eisenhower, *The Eisenhower Diaries*, New York 1981; see also Abba Eban, *Personal Witness— Israel through my Eyes*, London, 1993, pp. 260–286.

Agreement between Israel and the majority of the United Nations. She accused the United Nations of shameless and unconditional surrender to Nasser. On the eve of her return to Israel, her frayed nerves failed her. The victim was Abba Eban, as related by Gideon Rafael who witnessed the incident:

Golda, still smoldering from what she called the Dulles dupery, reached the boiling-point when she was informed that the United Nations Secretariat was discussing arrangements with Cairo for the Egyptian return to Gaza. It was late in the evening when she called Eban and myself to see her in her suite on the twenty-third floor of the Savoy Plaza Hotel. She presented us with a confidential report and her decision to ask Ben-Gurion to cancel the orders for the evacuation of the Gaza Strip which was scheduled for March 7. Eban explained that we were beyond the point of no return. Israel could not go back on its solemn pledge without causing irreparable harm. Its relations with the United States would not endure the strain and its position in the world would be demolished. He suggested that Golda herself should warn Foster Dulles of the incalculable consequences of a breach of the agreement. That was the last straw for the foreign minister. 'Now you want me to repair the mess', she fumed, 'after you have confronted me with a *fait accompli*'. Her pent-up frustrations erupted like a geyser. Her ambassador, she claimed, had not deigned to report to her personally all the stages of his negotiations with Dulles and Hammarskjold, let alone consult her. Of course, he was covered by the instructions of the prime minister, but after all she was the foreign minister.

Eban was stupefied and speechless, a condition as abnormal for him as my attendance at a ministerial dressing-down of an ambassador. Then, without any further comment, Golda demanded that Eban cable the prime minister right then and there to postpone the withdrawal. Eban simply refused and, visibly shaken, suggested that if she felt so strongly on the matter, she should send the telegram in her own name. Now it was Golda's term to be stupefied. It was apparently the first time that she had encountered Eban in a rebellious mood. She was beside herself and cried that she would jump out of the window. In her state of mind I feared it was not just a figure of speech. I tried to calm her down but to no avail. She raised her voice from demand to command level. Without saying a word Eban got up, marched out and shut the door behind him with audible emphasis.

Golda slumped down to an armchair and held her head between her hands. After a short while she asked me quietly to take down the text of her message to Ben-Gurion. I felt it was useless to argue with her in her condition. She first had to get it out of her system. She dictated the gist of what she wanted to say and left the drafting to me. After I had read the finished product to her, I said pensively: 'Golda, on second thoughts, do you really believe it necessary to send the cable? The information was not new to Ben-Gurion. He certainly received it through his own channels. If he thinks that it is so weighty as to make a momentous change in the government's decision, he'll do it without prodding. But if he concludes that it is not warranted, you are going to make things even more difficult for him that they already are. If he has to turn your advice down, it will be embarrassing for both of you.' She pondered a moment, sighed deeply and without any further comment said: 'OK, forget it.' She offered me a cup of coffee, her equivalent of a peace pipe, and then we chatted leisurely about the occurrences of the day.<sup>33</sup>

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33 Rafael, *Destination Peace*, pp. 67–68.

When she returned to Israel and read Ben-Gurion's lengthy statement in the Knesset on March 5, in which he explained in detail the events that had led Israel to accept the arrangement, Golda noted that at no point did he mention her, Eban or the foreign ministry to commend them for the gallant job they did in repairing the damage after the Sinai war. That did not endear Ben-Gurion to her and she felt he did not appreciate the scope and dimensions of the diplomatic struggle she had led in America.

The IDF completed its withdrawal from Sharm el-Sheikh and the Gaza Strip on March 7. It was replaced by UNEF units. The next day the Egyptians organized riots in the Strip and that was the pretext for the return of the Egyptian army to Gaza. They claimed they were responding to popular demand. In a meeting with Ben-Gurion Golda poured her heart out. He tended, much more than Golda did, to believe in Eisenhower's promises, but the return of the Egyptian army to Gaza shook him badly. On the spot he decided to despatch Golda back to Washington and New York via Paris. She left Israel on March 15 telling reporters at the airport that what happened in Gaza was exactly the opposite of what should have happened. During her three-hour layover in Paris she met Guy Mollet and Antoine Pineau and announced that at least over the issue of the Gaza Strip there were no differences of opinion between Israel and France. Yaacov Tsur, who participated in the meetings, noted in his diary that the French exhibited feelings of guilt, confusion, humiliation and their general impotence for failing to help Israel. Tsur probably only expressed the feelings Golda had towards the French that did not change before, during and after the campaign.

On March 18, she and Eban met with Dulles who tried to allay their fears stating that the promises given to Ben-Gurion by Eisenhower on March 2 would be honored.<sup>34</sup> In a joint statement issued after the meeting, Israel and the United States announced that America remained true to the assumptions and expectations regarding the UN's responsibility for Gaza, freedom of navigation in the Straits and settling the conflict over the Suez Canal according to the six principles adopted by the Security Council in October 1956 that were accepted by Egypt. Golda expressed the severity in which Israel viewed the situation and stressed that it was in direct contradiction to the assumptions and expectations stated by her and others in the General Assembly on March 1. Several hours later, Dulles testified before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and said he gave Israel no new promises. He asked that Israel be patient and not claim in advance that the entire issue was lost. In retrospect he was right. Israel gained ten years of quiet in the southern border and Fedayun incursions from Gaza stopped, partly

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<sup>34</sup> Brecher, *Foreign Policy System of Israel*, p. 301.

because of UNEF presence. None of them knew that the March 1 document, with Dulles's handwriting, would ten years later play a key role when Nasser decided to expel UNEF, fill Sinai with troops and reimpose the blockade on the Straits of Tiran. Eban, by then Israel's Foreign Minister, argued with the Johnson administration that these commitments given in 1957 should enable the United States to recognize Israel's right to act in self-defense.

Once again Golda returned to Israel convinced that her mission had failed. The American position remained the same. The Egyptians dug themselves in the Gaza Strip as though nothing happened. On April 2, Golda addressed the Knesset and tried to explain the diplomatic struggle. Her speech was restrained and her major argument was—Israel could not fight alone due to fear of total isolation and had to accept what she thought was the best chance to strengthen Israel's security and economic position. She finished her speech by calling on Israelis not to jump from a mood of elation to one of despair, but to accept reality as it was and use the new situation to bolster the country.<sup>35</sup> She did not speak of a comprehensive peace and understood that Israel could not dictate a settlement. Actually she avoided admitting that at least at this stage, Israel's international standing had weakened as a result of the war.<sup>36</sup>

The great drama was over. Historians still argue over the benefits and losses of the Sinai War. There is no doubt that the gains far outweighed the losses. Among the first to note that Israel had irrevocably changed the face of the Middle East was General Charles De Gaulle, then still in political exile. On November 16, he told Ambassador Tsur to tell Ben-Gurion that even if Israel lost Sinai, she emerged from the war with vast gains and her regional and international standing completely altered. The IDF gained much respect and what had happened certainly affected the future of the Middle East. In this assessment, De Gaulle was correct.<sup>37</sup>

Israel gained more than that: the IDF fought well and its leadership was fully satisfied with its fast advance into Sinai. Israel gained ten years of peace and quiet on its southern border and could use the time to build, partly with German Reparations money, its industrial-technological infrastructure and to absorb a quarter of a million new immigrants who came between 1957 and 1967. The education system expanded, a new campus of the Hebrew University was built on Givat Ram, as were the Israel Museum and the New Knesset Building. Foundations were laid for the establishment of Tel Aviv University, a new deep-sea port in Ashdod, two power stations were built in Hadera and Ashkelon. The construction

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<sup>35</sup> Address in the Knesset, 2 April 1957.

<sup>36</sup> Kimche, *Second Arab Reawakening*, p. 215.

<sup>37</sup> Tsur, *Paris Diary*, p. 313.

of the nuclear reactor in Dimona was finished by 1963. The National Water Carrier was inaugurated in 1964. Scores of new settlements were established. An oil pipeline was built from Eilat to Ashkelon partly with French money. Eilat developed and Israel was now recognized as a major factor in the region. It was no longer possible to think of wiping it off the map of the Middle East and throwing her people to the sea.

However, Israel's leaders did realize that its economic weakness made it vulnerable and it could not withstand heavy pressures and that Israel could not dictate a settlement by military means. On the other side of the fence, a number of Arab leaders, mainly Nasser, drew the conclusion that before attempting a third round against Israel, they must unite and build their armies, a process that could take years. Until then, Ben-Gurion and his closest associates believed, Israel would be an indisputable fact and the price the Arabs would have to pay to harm it would be so high as to deter them from doing so in the future. But few harbored any illusion that the Arabs were closer to accepting the very existence of Israel and would try to eliminate it in the future, at the time and place of their choosing. The Sinai war again humiliated them while the wounds of 1948 were still fresh. Although Nasser saw the conclusion of the war as a major political victory, deep in his heart he realized that for the time being, at least from a military point of view, Israel was unbeatable.

For Golda Meir, the Sinai War would have other consequences in the area in which she would become famous as foreign minister—the opening to Africa. While Third World countries initially violently criticized Israel for participating in a colonial-type campaign, when the dust lifted and cooler heads prevailed, some leaders first in Asia and then in Africa began to wonder about Israel's military prowess, organization and capabilities. How could a small country in the Middle East, surrounded by enemies and with severe domestic problems, pull off such a brilliant campaign and even achieve some political gains? Their curiosity arose over this little country called Israel: How did the Israelis build such a powerful industrial-technological-military infrastructure in such a short time? In the coming years, this curiosity would be translated to strong ties between Israel and many Third World nations. Golda Meir as foreign minister would lead this effort and this would be one of her major achievements in this post.

During the war and mainly during the diplomatic struggle, Golda endured many difficult times. The strain and anxiety left their marks on her. The American betrayal demonstrated to her that Israel could rely on nobody and no nation. Her experience in 1956 and 1957 left her with many negative thoughts and explains her thinking, moves and policies when she served as prime minister after the Six Days War. Her experience in the aftermath of the Sinai War taught her to treat every document with suspicion and every promise with much qualification. Hence her

insistence on arrangements anchored in clear and precise language instead of vague promises of “assumptions and expectations” whose interpretation was moot. The American policy angered her greatly. She grew up in the United States and trusted the decency and honesty of the American people. Regrettably, she could not respond publically to their harsh attitude. It is hard to agree with the Israeli scholar Zaki Shalom who claimed later that the complex political struggle fell on Golda’s shoulders who lacked political experience for such a struggle, and on Israel’s ambassador to the United States who lacked authority to wage and organize such a diplomatic campaign in whose necessity he did not even believe.

She found it more difficult to respond to another slight, because this time it came from Ben-Gurion, whose motives she failed to understand. While she did not expect compliments from the leader over the manner in which she had handled the political struggle, she was not prepared for the humiliation dealt her by Ben-Gurion in early 1957, whether he meant it or not. On January 18, 1957, he delivered a speech in kibbutz Givat Chaim. The speech may have been aimed at Moshe Sharett, but it struck Golda Meir, then still in New York. In his speech, Ben-Gurion said among other things:

Three years ago, several months before my retirement from the government, I did a fundamental survey of our security situation and needs. After several weeks of studies with the IDF commanders and with all those engaged in the security effort, I presented to the cabinet a three year defense plan—for the IDF’s improvement, its organization, equipment and training. The number of three years was not accidental. From the sources that we had at the time on the state of armament in the Arab armies, we could assume with a large degree of certainty that we should not be attacked by our enemies before 1956. But the Czech deal and the active military assistance by the Soviets to the Egyptian dictator brought forwards the hour of peril. Our major concern was to bolster our defense. This activity-packed period had five stages:

The first stage, from October 1955 to mid June 1956, was the stage of desparately obtaining in various countries defensive weapons and guarantees for our security. We managed to obtain a small number, albeit important, of jet planes, but generally speaking, our efforts in this stage failed. The second phase began with Golda’s entry into the Foreign Ministry. I am convinced that Golda will not be angry and not dispute me if I say that the comrade who preceded her all the years in the Foreign Ministry was far superior to her in his vast experience in Israeli and international politics, in his general and Jewish education, as well as other talents. But Golda, in addition to her special talent, had an additional advantage that may surprise you if I name it, and may seem to many as a failure, but I think this advantage led to important results, that advantage was that Golda lacked until then any experience in the Foreign Ministry. Thanks to that we could conduct our political action not according to protocol and rituals, not in the accepted channels. The unorthodox efforts bore fruit. We managed to obtain the minimum amount of arms necessary to survive. This is a highly interesting and glorious story.<sup>38</sup>

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38 Sharett Diary, pp. 1963–1967.

Sharett was deeply hurt and called the speech a blood libel. In his diary, Sharett noted that Golda called Ben-Gurion a “wild man”.<sup>39</sup> When the text reached her, she probably wondered about the character of the supreme leader and the nature of their relations. He did not even have the grace to wait until the political struggle in America ended or at least until she would return home before he publicly belittled her talents and made highly uncomplimentary equations between her and Sharett. She never mentioned this speech in public, but remembered it well. She agreed to the removal of Sharett when she reached the conclusion that it served not only Ben-Gurion but Israel’s needs as she understood them at the time. But she certainly did not expect such an expression of ‘gratitude’. For the time being, she remained a loyal retainer of the “old man”, scrupulously carrying out his policies, and by this she further hurt the image and standing of the Foreign Ministry, since Ben-Gurion himself said that this ministry operated in orthodox ways that did not fit Israel’s situation. Ben-Gurion loosened the belt and in fact opened the door to his close and young assistants in the Defense Ministry and the IDF who now understood that the Foreign Ministry was an easy target that could be maligned. The results were not late in coming.

One of the more significant consequences of the Sinai War was the rising star of several of Ben-Gurion’s young associates, who now became well-known national figures. They contributed a great deal to the victory in the war and showed how Israel’s position could be strengthened—by the use of force. With every sensational revelation of the events that preceded the war, the bravery of the IDF, Moshe Dayan and Shimon Peres became household names, while those of Golda Meir, Abba Eban and the Israeli diplomatic corps were shunted aside. Their role in achieving a number of important political gains, such as the freedom of navigation and the specific American commitment to uphold this principle, or the effective demilitarization of Sinai, were ignored. All these would find expression a decade later during the May 1967 crisis. Golda never remembered the Sinai Campaign as an event of which she was proud. She did not defend this war with much passion, as did Ben-Gurion, Dayan and Peres. She remained quite reserved over the growing ties with France. Yet, this was her baptism of fire in modern diplomacy. She became acquainted once again with the traitorous nature of international politics. Above all, she learned a very valuable lesson—Israel must be strong, she cannot rely on others, and if the situation so demands, must be prepared to act alone. She never saw herself, nor did others, as a major architect of the Sinai War. She was not one of the key decision-makers, but she turned out to be an excellent field commander, when she translated Ben-Gurion’s instructions

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<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2085.



into political action in New York. In her memoirs she devoted a very short space to this momentous event, less than nine pages of the 333 in the book. Perhaps in this manner she wanted to forget the huge bitterness of those days and the failure to achieve some of the anticipated results. In the long run, Israel did gain a very impressive achievement, especially when the country found itself facing a no less dramatic event ten years later—the Six Days War.

## 13 Madam Foreign Minister (1957–1965)

Although Golda was formally appointed as foreign minister on June 18, 1956, her first year in this office was devoted mainly to the preparations for the Sinai war, to the war itself and above all to the diplomatic struggle aimed at assuring that the fruits of the military achievement would not be lost. During those stormy days, she did not devote much time and thought on how to develop her own thinking on broader foreign affairs issues and did not even think of reorganizing the Foreign Ministry according to her world view. She decided against making a revolution in the Foreign Ministry and preferred to leave intact the senior officials and the structure she had inherited from Sharett in June 1956. She did not want to be accused of a personal vendetta by pushing out his men. Furthermore, she could not detach senior staff from the Ministry of Labor and bring them to her new office as they dealt with different matters and had no experience in foreign affairs. There was another reason for the absence of an orderly thinking on her part—her prolonged absences from Israel between September 1956 and April 1957 and her natural aversion to focusing on long-term planning. In the preceding seven years as minister of labor, she dealt with tangible matters and with people, focusing mainly on the need to find quick solutions to such issues as immigration, absorption, housing, laying roads, legislation—all these yielded concrete and immediate results, whereas diplomacy dealt with long-range planning, attempts to guess the moves of friends and foes alike. All this did not fit her previous experience and her innate inability to brood over abstract matters, something that characterized both Ben-Gurion and Sharett. She was by nature an active and restless personality and, it must be admitted, in those days it was almost impossible to plan long-range foreign policy for Israel mostly because of the uncertainty that still hovered over Israel's future. Under these circumstances, it is impossible to fault Golda for not calling for working papers and long-term plans. Having said this, in one specific issue, relations between Israel and the emerging African nations, she demonstrated solid thinking and planning. This area would become one of the hallmarks and probably her major achievement in her ten years as foreign minister.

Usually, she tended to rely on her intuition that would lead her to seek partial solutions and a great deal of improvisation. In the Foreign Ministry, like other positions she held in the past, she started her stint carefully, without making bombastic declarations on her intentions and with no orderly work plan either. She began by studying the many subjects that the ministry dealt with through asking down-to-earth questions and holding long discussions with the senior staff, instead of reading hefty tomes, documents and position papers. The main complaint leveled at her by the senior staff was that she did not read or write but obtained her information by asking questions and by listening carefully to what

they had to say. Soon they understood that with Golda one had to speak, not to write lengthy memorials that she would never read or ask one of her assistants to summarize them for her and in the process she would miss their nuances. Her evident unwillingness to read documents, compared with Sharett's very meticulous reading of everything that was placed on his desk, did not add much respect for her and some of the officials expressed these sentiments in a derisive and sneering manner. She responded to her more outspoken critics by posting some of them to far away and minor posts overseas or keeping them in Jerusalem in insignificant positions, thus removing them from the center of activity, or she simply stopped inviting them to important discussions.

For three days in June 1956, Sharett attempted to teach Golda how the ministry functioned, but that was not enough. She displayed enormous patience to hear him out, and once again she displayed her talent of differentiating what was important and secondary and to determine what should be dealt with at once and what could be postponed. She did not lean on scientific and historic analysis of the Middle East reality, saying that in any case Israel could not change the Arab's world view, so why bother. It was preferable to dig in, deepen Israel's roots in the land, wait for the time when the Arabs would realize that Israel could not be pushed to the sea and then, hopefully, they would change their attitude. Since she never developed independent thinking on foreign policy, she echoed mainly the thinking of her mentor at the time—Ben-Gurion. During her first year in the ministry she actually did her apprenticeship under Ben-Gurion. If there were a few cases when they disagreed, it was over tactics and not strategy. She opposed the IDF withdrawal from the Gaza Strip in March 1957 while he came to the conclusion it was inevitable. She refused to trust the leaders of the United States whereas he thought that he could trust President Eisenhower's word that Israel would not regret its decision to withdraw from Sinai and Gaza. Over the years, it was evident that he was right. At the end of her first year as foreign minister, when things quieted down, it was expected that she would ask for a renewed assessment of Israel's international standing and accordingly would fashion a new foreign policy (as Abba Eban did when he assumed this position in January 1966). But she acted differently.

From early 1957 until the end of her term as foreign minister at the end of 1965, she clung almost tenaciously to Ben-Gurion's worldview. The arguments they had on various matters, apart from relations with Germany, occurred when she was convinced he strayed from the line he himself had formulated. Ben-Gurion's thinking in those days was expressed during a discussion in Mapai's Central Committee on March 4, 1958. In his diary, he noted: "Suddenly I saw the global situation and our situation in it".<sup>1</sup> He came to the conclusion that at this stage there was no

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<sup>1</sup> Mapai Central Committee, 4 March 1958.

chance to achieve comprehensive contractual peace treaties with the neighboring countries. Shortly before then, he related, the well-known American journalist Joseph Alsop came to see him, looked at the map of the Middle East that hung on Ben-Gurion's office wall and asked: How will you survive? Ben-Gurion answered that he was convinced that the only way to bring the Arabs to the negotiating table would be to instill in them the sense that there was no way to annihilate Israel. Peace would come when Israel would be strong and powerful. He added that at this stage peace was far removed since the Soviet Union clung to its anti-Israel policy. The Arabs were far more important to the Russians than Israel, and that Soviet influence in the Middle East meant control of the oil resources that had vast influence on the economic development of Western Europe and Japan, then dependent on Arab oil, and since the Soviets were determined to strengthen their hold in the Arab world, he thought that while American Jews were an important factor in the shaping of America's Middle East policy, Soviet Jewry played exactly the opposite role. The leaders of the Kremlin suspected and even feared their dual loyalty and intensified their hostility to Israel as a hint to Soviet Jews not to dream of immigrating to Israel. Ben-Gurion did not believe that the Russians were interested in Israel's annihilation, but their hostile stance only strengthened the Arab refusal to come to terms with Israel, knowing that they were backed by a superpower. He argued that the Soviets had no interest in promoting Arab-Israel peace and hoped that at least they would not undermine the very delicate structure in the post-Sinai Middle East. He was convinced that the Arab view of the Arab-Israel conflict was rooted in their historic perception that eventually they would destroy the Jews as they triumphed over other enemies. The Arabs were convinced that time was on their side and they must pursue policies that would systematically weaken Israel and wait for the right time to attack the Jewish state until it would collapse. But that could take a long time and in the interim they must never make peace with Israel. At this stage they had to rely on the Soviet Union to become militarily stronger. Ben-Gurion did not believe that in those days China and India could play a meaningful role in the Middle East. So what remained, he asked. There were no major factors in Asia and Africa that could help Israel, but it must do its utmost to help the new nations that had just gained their independence, thus strengthening Israel's moral standing in the world. He did not expect much succor from the Latin America nations.

His view of Europe was interesting in its originality. Of all the European nations, Germany, which had completely abandoned its Nazi past, wielded the greatest influence on America. Ben-Gurion was convinced that the future of Franco-Israel relations was dependent to a large extent on the ties between Israel and the Federal Republic of Germany. At the time, Peres called Germany "a shelter for a rainy day". Both assumed that once the rebellion in Algeria would

be resolved, France could renounce its commitments to Israel, forcing the latter to cement its ties with the rising European power—Germany. On this issue there arose acrimonious disagreements between Ben-Gurion and Peres on the one side and Golda Meir on the other. For mainly emotional reasons, she refused to acknowledge the existence of the new entity that Ben-Gurion called “The Other Germany”, new and democratic. Since she was never at ease with the French, as far as she was concerned that left only the British, the Benelux and the Scandinavian nations and perhaps Italy. But at the time they seemed to her like broken reeds.

Ben-Gurion’s sober conclusion was that Israel must obtain guarantees to her existence from the powers and maintain the existing territorial status quo. He would welcome Soviet guarantees but understood that the Russians had no interest in maintaining the status quo that was unacceptable to their friends in the Arab world. He had few expectations from Britain. British Jewry had scant influence on British foreign policy and he, like many of his comrades, could never rid himself of the historic suspicion of British intentions. There remained the United States that Ben-Gurion thought was the leading power already in the 1930’s. In spite of the tensions resulting from the Sinai campaign, he expected from America guarantees, understanding, military and financial aid and later he would aspire to reach a military alliance with America. At this stage, he hoped that Israel could be included in some military alliance such as NATO, either as a full or an associate member. His policy then was based on his conviction that Israel must strengthen its own defensive capabilities, continue to build the nuclear reactor in Dimona (whose construction was completed in 1963), and above all build its air force to prevent a surprise attack. He thought Israel could deal with the Arabs, even if they possessed vast quantities of Soviet weapons, but he wanted international guarantees and assurances to deter the Russians from active participation in an Arab attack on Israel. European and American assurances could deter the Russians from such thoughts. This long process could lead the Arabs, over time, to the conclusion that they must come to terms with Israel’s existence. Hence the major component of the peace process would be strengthening Israel’s military, economic, political and moral standing.

Apart from Germany, Golda had no substantive arguments with Ben-Gurion. She shared his view of the Arabs and at times was far more radical than he was.<sup>2</sup> She did not believe that the Arabs would agree to accept Israel’s existence in this generation. For them, Israel was not only an artificial entity planted by British imperialism with America’s help, but the very existence of Israel as a sovereign

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<sup>2</sup> Brecher, *Foreign Policy System of Israel*, pp. 302–311.

Jewish-Zionist state in the heart of the Arab world violated the universal order. Golda understood the problem, but outwardly she continued to claim that all that was required to resolve the problem were direct negotiations between the Israeli and Arab leaders. What would they have discussed? That was another matter. Unlike Sharett, she never bothered to study in depth the history of the Arabs or delve into their psychology. She relied mainly on their leader's public statements, carefully collected for her by eager aides. These statements were naturally highly extreme. She often cited their public statements to prove the depth of their hostility to Israel. She was convinced that as long as the Arabs refused to negotiate directly with Israel, there was no need for Israel to state in advance what she would be prepared to concede for the sake of peace. Any statement would invite additional concessions and the result would be that Israel would be offering concrete concessions for no similar commitments on the part of the Arabs. If they were not prepared to make concessions, what was the point of negotiations, she asked.

Her conclusion was very simplistic: Israel's very existence is a moral decree and supreme value that should never be challenged. Without Israel there is no future for the existence of the Jewish people. Any measure taken to strengthen Israel had a high moral value. In the years 1949 to 1956, the greatest fear of Israel's leaders had been that they would be required to make territorial concessions, either to return to the 1947 partition lines or make concessions in the Negev to Egypt and Jordan to promote peace in addition to taking back a sizeable number of Palestinian refugees. After the Sinai war, there was no longer any discussion of forcing Israel to make territorial concessions in the Negev. Attention was now focused on Palestinian refugees and Golda had to deal often with this issue. As far as she was concerned, the Arabs made a cynical use of this human tragedy. The unprecedented demand that Israel take back the refugees seemed to her a recipe for the destruction of Israel. No nation was asked to allow refugees back after a war. On the contrary, the effort was to resettle them as speedily as possible in the countries where they found shelter. In those days, no Israeli leader ever hinted to Israel's small and indirect responsibility for the creation of the refugee problem, the blame was placed squarely at the feet of the Arabs. Any concession in this issue would be interpreted as an Israeli weakness, invite additional concessions and become a tool in the hands of the right-wing opposition in Israel against the Mapai-led government.

Her thinking on the territorial issue was also quite simplistic. At this point, Israel should not yield one square centimeter of the territory within the Green Line (the 1949 Armistice Agreements lines that were in force until June 5, 1967). If there were any territorial changes, they must be the result of direct negotiations leading to the signing of peace treaties with the neighboring countries. She was prepared to consider territorial swaps, but within the framework of peace treaties.

The truth was that Israel's leaders knew they had no intention of making concessions, thus while they proclaimed constantly their eagerness to enter into direct negotiations, they knew that the minimal territorial demand of the Arabs and the powers would be the return of Israel to borders that would be a compromise between the 1947 partition lines and those of the 1949 Armistice Agreements in addition to the return of a substantial number of refugees. Israel's experience in meetings with Arab representatives in Lausanne in 1949 indicated this trend. Israel was then, or now, not prepared to accept such prior conditions. Israel was rescued from these demands by the constant refusal of the Arabs to consider direct or even indirect negotiations, arguing that any negotiations would mean recognition of Israel, something they were irrevocably opposed to. Their position on this issue was similar to Golda's views on Germany: "With Germans you sit only as victors with the vanquished". Due to the Arab refusal to enter into direct negotiations with Israel, it had to seek indirect arrangements and understandings, mainly with the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. Israel was terrified that in case negotiations started, the powers would not commit themselves to the maintenance of the territorial status quo, since their interests dictated supporting the Arab position rather than maintaining the Armistice Demarcation Lines which Israel wholeheartedly clung to in those days.

On the other hand, Israel was prevented from expressing such sentiments since they could be interpreted as total despair of ever reaching an agreement. Such expressions would require certain conclusions, the main one being that the Arab states would never accept Israel and would do their utmost to undermine the status quo even if that meant war. Another option was that Israel, finding itself under serious threat, would engage in a preventive war as it did in 1956. Another option was a solution imposed by the powers, something that had to be strongly resisted. This was one of the reasons that Israel's leaders in those days were not inclined to accept the underlining assumptions of Israel's Arabists and Middle East experts that the foundations of the Arab hostility were based on historic, ethnic, communal, national, cultural, religious, psychological and economic forces and that problems that had to do with territory, refugees and the balance of power were an outcome of these deeper factors. If the hostility was so ingrained among the Arabs, why should they make peace, which would lead the powers to impose concessions on Israel. Since the Arab issue was so complicated and multi-factored, Golda often wondered if there was any point for Israel to devote much time and thought to dealing with this seemingly intractable and insoluble problem. As a result, she did not support the ideas of some of her aides to undertake certain initiatives and they felt highly frustrated. One of them, Ezra Danin, who accompanied her to the two meetings with King Abdullah, was quite desparate when he wrote at the end of the 1950's that there was no

orderly thinking on the Arab question in the Foreign Ministry. All was haphazard and improvised while the minister was busy with other matters. Since Golda was goal-oriented, she wanted to achieve immediate results and not wait for a long time to allow processes to ripen. Danin and the other Arabists in the Foreign Ministry understood the Arabs had time and that eventually they would find a way to deal with Israel. Thus they thought Israel must signal to the Arabs that there were certain issues that could be discussed. Golda thought differently, but she was prepared to put Nasser to a test. Would he be willing, for example, to allow passage through the Suez Canal of foreign vessels carrying nonstrategic cargo to or from Israel? The Israeli government did make a number of attempts, with the full knowledge of the UN Secretary General, but they failed as Egypt refused. This was seen by Israel as another proof of Arab duplicity.

She had serious problems with understanding and assessing the policy of the United States. Her experience with Dulles and Henry Cabot Lodge in early 1957 was humiliating and did not increase her trust in that power. She tended to think that the American Middle East establishment, mainly senior officials in the Departments of State and Defense, were tinged with anti-Semitism, and feared that they would not recoil from imposing an arrangement on Israel against her better judgment. One day she was in a car with the Israel Minister Plenipotentiary to Washington Ya'acov Herzog. As they rode past the Department of State he muttered: "They are hatching plots there." This was the typical attitude—fear of an imposed settlement. But knowing the American system of government, she focused on cementing ties with Congress, mainly the Senate, with labor unions, the academic community, the media, friendly Christian groups and naturally the leadership of the American Jewish community. They would counterbalance a hostile administration that, she hoped, would change over time. In the depth of her heart, she believed in the decency of the American people and their commitment to justice. She believed in them much more than she trusted the Europeans. The Holocaust took place in Europe, not in America, but she was aware that America did virtually nothing to rescue Jews. However, at this phase, the reality was brutal—the Eisenhower administration was openly hostile and still angry at Israel so there was an immediate need to rehabilitate the ties with it. She preferred to do so in a low profile and was very ably aided by Ambassador Eban and Minister Herzog.

Her worldview can be gleaned from scores of speeches and interviews in the Israeli and international media. Her speeches in the Knesset or in the United Nations were usually dry and lacked inspiration since they were written by others. She had difficulties in reading speeches written, for example, by Abba Eban, a master of the English language. His flowery style was not hers, and there was need to rewrite his speeches and adapt them to her style this was seen as



desecration of the holy as Eban was recognized as one of the most impressive orators in the English language. There is no single document which explains her worldview, similar to that of Ben-Gurion in March 1958 that would show a deep analysis of the regional and international situation. Her annual Knesset speeches when presenting the budget of the Foreign Ministry were a recitation of Israel's relations with various parts of the world that were read in a monotonous tone and an effort was made not to hurt the sensibilities of any country. Her appearances before the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee or the leading bodies of Mapai were less restrained. But they, too, did not attest to an orderly worldview. Images that clung to her from her early years in Palestine stayed with her and did not undergo any major change even if the regional and international situation changed considerably. In spite of the fact that Israel's strategic situation greatly improved as a result of the Sinai war, Golda still used pre-war terms of a besieged Israel that must defend itself against implacable enemies.

The problem that Israel faced in 1957 was not so much the absence of a policy—that was determined in its broad outline by Ben-Gurion, but who would implement it. Soon it became evident that Golda would have to fight an uphill battle to preserve the jurisdiction of the Foreign Ministry against the attempts of encroachment by the Prime Minister's Office and mainly the Ministry of Defense, led *de jure* by Ben-Gurion, but *de facto* by Shimon Peres. The Sinai Campaign brought forth a group of young officials in the Defense Ministry who were deeply involved in the initiation and planning of that war. The Foreign Ministry diplomats, who were excluded from the early secret stages of the planning, were highly embarrassed. Their personal standing and that of the ministry as an institution that had already suffered a major blow when Sharett was forced to resign, was further humiliated in their own eyes and those of others. After the fighting ended, they were called upon to salvage some political gains, which they did, albeit not very successfully, not because of their failures but because of a new and harsh international setting. In the first few months after Sinai, there was much muttering in the IDF and Defense Ministry aimed at the Israeli diplomats whose main achievement was a series of vague "assumptions and expectations". Ben-Gurion added to this feeling in his Givat Chaim speech in which he said that Golda's positive attribute was her lack of foreign affairs experience (which was definitely not true), and his words were interpreted to mean that there was no need for diplomatic experience. He and his men identified the Foreign Ministry with Sharett, and Sharett with Weizmann, meaning caution, diplomacy, diplomatic notes, protests, long, cumbersome and complicated formulations. In June 1956, Ben-Gurion had already determined in the Knesset what the Foreign Ministry's standing in the national order of priorities would be. It would remain secondary and complement the work of the Defense Ministry. In his March 1958 speech he talked about

the need to strengthen Israel's security and did not even hint at the possibility that salvation would arise from diplomacy. He thought that the Arabs understood only the language of force, and this was the manner in which Israel should talk to them. Diplomats by the very nature of their trade spurned the use of force, therefore they only had a secondary role in bolstering Israel's defense. At best they would be door openers, a conduit that would enable the Defense Ministry officials to obtain weapons.

When it came to getting arms, the Defense Ministry officials were restless and in constant motion. They watched carefully and with much anxiety the always ongoing arms race in the region and came to the conclusion that Israel must always remain one step ahead of the Arabs in order to maintain a fragile balance of power. There was no time for long processes, for lengthy and tiring negotiations either directly or through mediators. There was urgent need to rapidly acquire the latest modern weapons in vast quantities. They could not rely on the diplomats to act quickly. The diplomats required authorization from Jerusalem for every move, something that took time and could raise questions of interministerial coordination. There were other differences between the officials of the Foreign Ministry and those of the Defense Ministry, based on age, mentality, background and the authority given to them. The Defense Ministry officials were mostly younger men, in their 30's and 40's, native-born Israelis who rose from the Hagannah, lacked university education, were leaders and members of Mapai's younger generation and acted under the umbrella of the inspiring and unchallenged Ben-Gurion, who granted them full backing. They assumed that his blessing hovered over all their deeds, even if they did not always possess written authorization signed by the "old man". These men acted in unorthodox ways, as the acquisition of arms was never routine since it required imaginative action. If you could not go through the main door, there were always side doors or even back doors. This was Peres's experience in France since 1954 and in Germany from 1957. They pursued their goals relentlessly and in total secrecy, far removed from the media or public scrutiny. Getting arms for Israel entailed much honor and those engaged in it felt this was holy work. Since these methods proved their value during the War of Independence and the Sinai Campaign, there was no need to deviate from these habits and act in more orthodox ways and in cooperation with the Foreign Ministry that formally was in charge of conducting Israel's foreign relations.

In contrast, the senior Israeli diplomats were older, veterans of the Political Department of the Jewish Agency, born in Eastern, Central or Western Europe, held university degrees and, in some cases, did not even speak Hebrew. The Defense Ministry officials did not have time to study at university due to their service in the Hagannah, the British army and the IDF. It was well known that some of the diplomats were highly critical of the Sinai War and that their former

minister, Sharett, was convinced that this campaign severely harmed Israel's long-term interests as it only further inflamed the Arabs' hatred of Israel and strengthened their determination to annihilate the Jewish state, now that they were once again humiliated by Israel. The Defense Ministry officials heaped much scorn on the diplomats whom they accused of possessing "Diaspora mentality". This was the background for the vastly differing views of the two ministries on how best to deal with Israel's security problems. The commanders of the IDF did not forget the Foreign Ministry objections to most of the retaliatory raids in 1953–1956 and were not prepared to admit that this policy had basically failed and that the assessments of the Foreign Ministry, at least in this sphere, were correct. Unlike the Defense Ministry, the Foreign Ministry lacked a base among the Israeli public, it never had "clients", unlike the Defense Ministry that had many "clients", among them were the IDF, regular and reserve units, and the military industries which meant many workers. Finally, Ben-Gurion's concept won over that of Sharett giving the defense establishment the feeling that they were the leading policy-making body in the country.

When Golda entered the Foreign Ministry, the heads of the defense establishment assumed that she, being Ben-Gurion's loyal disciple, would not unduly obstruct their unorthodox ways and they would be able to continue to act through their own channels, mainly through the huge bodies overseas called the defense purchasing missions. These operated parallel to the Israeli embassies with big staffs in Paris, London, New York and later in Bonn. Another body operated overseas as well, the Mossad, which reported directly to Ben-Gurion, similar to the defense establishment. Because of her personal ties with the head of the Mossad, Isser Harel, Golda was privy to what they were doing. Soon the Defense Ministry officials realized they had been wrong. Golda did not acquiesce with the limited jurisdiction of her ministry. During her seven years in the Ministry of Labor, there had been virtually no interference by other bodies in the subjects over which she held exclusive jurisdiction, and her dominant personality was able to overcome the objections of the ministers of interior, welfare, finance and commerce and industry. Now, when she became foreign minister, the third most important position in the Israeli political hierarchy, she realized how limited her authority was and how often and easily her ministry was bypassed by others who were not prepared to coordinate their moves, actions and positions or even simply to report what they were doing. Other ministries also began to operate overseas. The Finance Ministry had a large representative office in New York and the director general of the Prime Minister's Office also had a branch in New York in the shape of the Israel Government Tourist Organization that would soon become the Ministry of Tourism. The tourism people demanded diplomatic passports; Golda objected but Ben-Gurion ruled in favor of Teddy Kollek who also established a

department in the Prime Minister's Office dealing with contacts with the Diaspora, a role that should have been in the exclusive purview of the Foreign Ministry. Another task, that of dealing with the growing number of the permanent foreign correspondents corps in Israel, was handled by another unit in the Prime Minister's Office, the Government Press Office. The heads of this unit coordinated with the Foreign Ministry but reported to Teddy Kollek, as did the Israel Broadcasting Service until 1965. The radio station had to work with the Foreign Ministry mainly about the contents of its Arabic language broadcasts.

There were a number of senior Foreign Ministry officials who maintained direct contact with the prime minister. One of them was Reuven Shiloah, the first head of the Mossad and from 1957 until his untimely death in 1959 political adviser to the foreign minister. His close ties with Ben-Gurion prevented him from becoming the ambassador in Washington. That post went to Avraham Harman, a close ally of Golda. Another diplomat who maintained direct contact with Ben-Gurion was Ya'acov Herzog, who acted as Ben-Gurion's political adviser during the Sinai War and won his total confidence. Such arrangements often led to serious problems, duplication, waste and much tension and friction. There were in fact four branches that were deeply involved in foreign policy—the IDF, the Foreign Ministry, the Mossad and the Defense Ministry in addition to several departments in the Prime Minister's Office. The foreign minister did not always possess full information on what the other bodies were doing. Each department accused the other of leaking information to the media to gain publicity or for the sake of domestic political advantage.

Matters became even more complicated when great competition between the two generations of leaders over the impending succession of Ben-Gurion began in earnest. The younger leaders attempted to demonstrate that their methods, although unorthodox, brought results, while those of the older leaders resembled Diaspora habits, relying on lobbying, lacking any sign of statehood and usually with insignificant results. They accused the veterans of relying on Jewish mediators and efforts to create pressure mostly on the American administration through Jewish organizations which they considered had Diaspora mentality. By going directly to the centers of power, as they did in France and Germany, Dayan and Peres succeeded without the intervention of local Jewish community mediators. Golda, however, supported by Abba Eban, held that America could not be ignored, partly because of the highly crucial Jewish lobby. In her constant struggle with Peres, Golda did not involve her senior officials since she rightly thought that civil servants should not to be involved in politics. The only one who had political ambitions was Eban. Therefore, she had to rely on her Mapai peers, her age group such as Sapir, Aranne and Eshkol, in her fight against the younger leaders. Their standing in the party was powerful, but apart from Golda, their understanding of

international affairs was limited, whereas that of Dayan and Peres was much more extensive. Above all, the latter enjoyed the patronage of Ben-Gurion. Golda often wondered if certain directives of Ben-Gurion transmitted to her through Yitzhak Navon, the director of his bureau, were really his or the fruits of Dayan and Peres's ideas. On rare occasions did Ben-Gurion criticize Peres for infringing on the jurisdiction of the Foreign Ministry. That was mainly mainly done to appease Golda and prevent her from resigning. In July 1957, Golda cancelled a meeting she was due to hold with Jean Monnet, the father of the European Union, aimed at seeking support for coopting Israel to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization or involving it in any other European framework, when she heard that Peres had already met with him in April and failed to report this to her. The Defense Ministry's representative in Paris, Asher Ben-Nathan, mumbled that "it was impossible to tell her as the meeting was organized at the last moment, and there was intention to tell her later, but this did not come off due to objective reasons".<sup>3</sup> She of course refused to accept this lame excuse. Her assessment of Peres did not improve when a serious incident occurred with France in February 1958. An Israeli plane loaded with Israeli-made weapons sold to the Dominican Republic by the Israeli Arms Industries ignoring the Foreign Ministry's objection made a forced landing in Algiers. The French discovered the weapons and suspected that Israel intended to sell these arms to the Algerian rebels. Peres had decided without consulting Golda to sell arms to the Dominican Republic, a country that was on the list of countries Israel would not sell weapons to, after it was revealed that Israel sold arms to the Nicaraguan dictator Anastasio Somoza. Golda threatened to resign and Ben-Gurion was forced to issue an official order to Peres: "No arms sales to foreign nations without my prior knowledge and approval would be made. I am to be informed only when there is a bid by a foreign nation to buy arms. I will not decide without prior consultation with the Foreign Ministry".<sup>4</sup> On the matter of Monnet, Ben-Gurion noted in his diary that "I told Golda and I am concerned and regret her suspicions—that are not unsubstantiated—against the Defense Ministry that interferes in foreign affairs. She told me that she is desparate. I told her that I will not agree with this despair. Golda argued that she had no quarrel with the chief of staff, but Shimon Peres does things without her knowledge, and agreed that there shall be a comradely discussion".<sup>5</sup> Her anger at Peres erupted in a meeting of Mapai's secretariat on December 6, 1958, when she said: "I know the youth must rebel against the old

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<sup>3</sup> Matti Golan, Peres, Tel Aviv, 1981.

<sup>4</sup> Golani, Peres, p. 88. See also Bar Zohar, Phoenix; Haggay Eshed, One Man's Mossad, Tel Aviv, 1988.

<sup>5</sup> Golani, Peres, pp. 88–89.

people, but I rebel against the young ones who think there is no need for an ideology and I rebel against the old people who support the youth that has no ideology”.

Another incident occurred in early 1959, when Peres proposed to the French Colonial Minister Jaques Soustelle the idea that Israel would lease French Guyana, a remote colony of 90,000 square kilometers in the northern part of the Latin American continent, with natural resources, for a period of 30 years or establish a Franco-Israeli company to develop Guyana and settle there several thousand Israelis. Peres was impressed by Guyana’s natural resources and thought the lease would further strengthen Franco-Israeli cooperation. A survey mission sent to study the scheme returned with a report and a movie. Peres’s biographer noted that “when the film was shown to the cabinet it created panic. Pinchas Sapir said it was a disaster, colonialism, imperialism, it would create a catastrophe in Africa and resistance in Latin America. Golda would never let this thing pass, only over her dead body.”<sup>6</sup> The “old man” promised her that as long as she was foreign minister, this would never happen. Her reaction in a closed meeting was that Peres was a frivolous adventurer. Another expression was that Peres was “infantile”. Such confrontations and others only strengthened her feeling that Peres was unreliable, an intriguer, adventurous and often uncomradely. This expression had special meaning in Mapai. It meant that this could be handled in a political framework where Golda enjoyed the support of the party veterans.

Peres knew well Golda’s negative and almost pathological attitude towards him. In his 1995 autobiography, called “Battling for Peace”, he wrote: “Golda’s revulsion towards me hung like a gloomy shadow over my political path...my relations with her were always complex and complicated, and usually miserable. With Golda, as I learned over the years, there was no intermediate state. Either you were one hundred percent for her, or she was one hundred percent against you. She could not bear any attitude less than adulation...” He agreed with Teddy Kollek’s saying that Golda’s foreign policy consisted of a list of those whom she hated. That list included from the mid 1950’s and early 1960’s Dag Hammarskjold, Secretary of State Christian Herter, French Prime Minister Michel Debre, Ghana’s President Kwame Nkrouma, Abba Eban and Shimon Peres. In her memoirs, Golda mentions Peres exactly four times and in all these instances he is lumped together with Moshe Dayan. It must be stated that Allon and Rabin did not earn more citations in “My Life”, either.

However, it was easier for Peres to confront Golda because of his close ties to Ben-Gurion. In Israel at the time there was no orderly decision-making process in foreign policy and there was no National Security Council in which representatives

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 83; see also Shimon Peres, *Battling for Peace*, London, 1995, pp. 260–286.

of the foreign, defense, intelligence and economic communities should have been represented. Decisions were often reached at random. The general policy outlines were delineated by Ben-Gurion, either alone or in consultations he held with close associates—Peres, Dayan and Navon. He made them think in an abstract way. Golda was occasionally invited to these discussions, but since she was oriented on dealing with concrete issues, her contributions were minor. Since Peres was present and deeply involved in policy-making, it was easier for him to translate it into concrete action and implement it, with the full knowledge that he knew better than the others what Ben-Gurion's real wishes were and how to obtain the goals he determined. The weekly cabinet meeting was never the forum for reaching key strategic foreign policy decisions. The cabinet preferred to leave these decisions to Ben-Gurion and Golda and later confirm them. The cabinet was not the organ that received full information. Ironically, the Committee of the Editors of the Israeli daily newspapers usually received more reliable, up-to-date and detailed information than the Israeli cabinet ministers. The Editors Committee was given this information mainly in order to prevent publication of stories that could harm state security and foreign relations, since it was impervious to leaks. In those days the military censorship was still an effective organ to preserve state secrets, but the Editors Committee served as a brake and filter for sensitive information. Golda often used this mechanism when she was foreign and later prime minister.

Those absent from the discussion of the small group that made key policy decisions were the senior staff of the Foreign Ministry. They could have provided the foreign minister with relevant material, had they known the subjects under discussion. Thus their ability to influence key decisions was at best limited. This inevitably led to a decline in their morale and they felt they were dealing with secondary issues. The family feeling that Sharett had created in the ministry slowly evaporated, partly because the size of the staff grew due to the new tasks the ministry was entrusted with as the ties with the Third World expanded. For these missions, Golda selected people from Mapai, kibbutzim and moshavim, heads of "Solel Boneh" and "Koor", on occasion professional diplomats. Some of the veteran diplomats were not exactly enthusiastic about serving in Accra, Dakar and Phnom Penh. They preferred Washington, London or Paris.

When Golda finally settled into her office in the second floor of the central building of the Foreign Ministry complex in West Jerusalem, where it remained from 1953 until it moved to its permanent modern building in 2000, she did not carry out a de-Sharettization process. The senior officials remained at their posts, some of them even continued to report on what was happening to their old boss—Sharett, which he regularly noted in his diary. She ignored this custom and correctly assumed that over time, this too would cease. The director general of the ministry, Walter Eytan, remained at his post, as did the heads of departments and

the ambassadors in the key capitals. She worked with her small team of her inner office and that of the director general. The head of the foreign minister's bureau had a central position in the ministry, second only to the director general. He knew her thoughts and order of priorities, he decided who would see the minister, what her schedule would be, what material she would read, who would read to her certain documents. He prepared the daily material in coordination with the various departments. He decided who would participate in certain discussions. This post was fulfilled over the years by Yochanan Meroz, Mordechai Gazit and Simcha Dinitz. Golda was a "night owl". The days were devoted to discussions, meetings with foreign diplomats and overseas visitors, media interviews and cabinet meetings, ministerial committees and Knesset sessions. Hardly a day passed without an official event at her home or elsewhere, formal lunches or dinners. In late 1956, she moved to the foreign minister's residence on Balfour Street in Jerusalem where Sharett had lived and Eban would live later. In 1974, Rabin moved the official residence of the prime minister to that building.

Late at night, she sat with the head of her bureau to go over cables and reports, making terse notes in her handwriting. She would write things like "he is right", "that is correct", "I disagree", "it is not in order" etc. The head of her bureau had to divine from her reactions the exact meaning of her intentions. On rare occasions, she dictated detailed cables. Most of the lengthy reports, including the daily, weekly and annual assessments of the IDF Intelligence Branch or the Mossad, were summarized by her aides. She held regular meetings with the senior staff on important matters. It was clear to all what was the area of responsibility of the Foreign Ministry. In his seminal book "Israel's Foreign Policy System", Michael Brecher noted that in the late 1950's and early 1960's, the following division of labor was created: The Defense Ministry looked after relations with Israel's major arms suppliers France and Germany. The Foreign Ministry was responsible for ties with the Asian and African continents, Eastern Europe and Latin America, in addition to economic ties, information and ties with Jewish communities abroad. The position of the United States was special, since Ben-Gurion displayed much interest in that country. As for the Middle East, there was no clear-cut division. The Middle East Department of the Foreign Ministry was meant to be an important department, but few in the ministry dealt with the region. This was more the responsibility of the Mossad and the IDF Intelligence Branch as well as some officials in the Prime Minister's Office. The Mossad also looked after ties with countries that had no diplomatic relations with Israel such as Morocco and Indonesia. Golda was informed of regional events, but did not always share her information with her senior staff.<sup>7</sup>

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7 Brecher, *Foreign Policy System of Israel*, pp. 403–409.



In fact, while the Foreign Ministry still had a vast area of responsibility, for some reason its senior staff felt that they were dealing with secondary and even minor issues, the real foreign policy decisions were made elsewhere by others. Even with ambassadorial appointments to certain countries, there was much pressure to provide diplomatic posts to political stalwarts, partly to keep them away from Israel or to award them for loyal service to Mapai. When Abba Eban came back from Washington in 1959, a major struggle arose as to who would succeed him. Ben-Gurion preferred Reuven Shiloah or Ya'acov Herzog. Golda stood her ground and appointed Avraham Harman, a veteran professional diplomat. Eilat's place in London was taken by another professional diplomat, Arthur Lurie.

Was there any room for independent thinking on the part of the ministry? Few officials thought they should deviate from the accepted official line. At best they offered different tactics, mainly when it came to the Middle East. Here there were several important initiatives, among them the "policy of the periphery", the brainchild of Reuven Shiloah, and some new ideas initiated by Ezra Danin. Some concern was expressed that the minister was not interested in independent thinking, although she never said so openly. But that was not true. She did attempt to encourage creative and innovative thinking mostly when it came to tactics. But the feeling among the senior staff was that it was pointless to argue with the minister on fundamental strategic issues. Angering the minister could lead to being sent to a remote diplomatic post. If some of them had unorthodox ideas, they preferred to express them "off the record". Memorandums were dangerous: someone could read them and leak them to the media. Golda never fired anyone for ideological reasons, but her facial expressions during meetings, her impatience and her cutting off other people showed the degree of her agreement or disagreement. Promotion was often determined not only by talent, experience and seniority, but also by the ability to avoid face-to-face confrontation with the minister, at least in public. This meant that officials were careful not to express nonconformist thoughts and opinions publicly. While during the Sharett era discussions were more abstract, and they included conversations on new books, Golda preferred practical and down-to-earth discussions, as she did in the Ministry of Labor. A subject was placed on the table for discussions, various alternatives were proposed and the minister chose one of them.

Golda knew well that the senior staff was selected, trained and nurtured by Sharett and was not "hers". At times she correctly suspected that some of them were more loyal to Ben-Gurion than to her. This situation burdened some ambassadors with a problem: who should they address their important cables to—Golda, Ben-Gurion or the heads of the defense establishment? Golda soon made it clear that all communications must be directed to her. Ironically, she did not follow this dictum when she was prime minister, when she encouraged

Ambassador Yitzhak Rabin, who was then posted in Washington, to bypass the Foreign Ministry then under Eban and to communicate directly with her. As a result of these strange procedures, some of the communication was done through extra-ministerial channels such as the Mossad. Therefore, there is no documentation of certain events and decisions. When something went wrong, it was hard to determine who gave the order.

This work habit created some problems for foreign governments in their contacts with Israel. Experienced foreign diplomats in Israel knew that on certain matters, they should communicate directly with the Defense Ministry, for example when it came to weapons purchase and sales, on other subjects with the Foreign Ministry. The French ambassador spent more time in the Defense Ministry in Tel Aviv than in the Foreign Ministry in Jerusalem. The fact that the Defense Ministry was in Tel Aviv while Golda's ministry was in Jerusalem meant that foreign diplomats did not always relish the ninety-minute ride to Jerusalem and preferred to discuss matters by phone or come to Jerusalem once a week. Tel Aviv was the cultural, economic and social center of Israel, even without the fact that the IDF Headquarters and the Defense Ministry were there. Until the Six Days War, Jerusalem was a remote, sleepy city, not noted for its active cultural and social life. Golda tried to infuse some culture and held many receptions in her official residence in Jerusalem, but she, like most of the cabinet members including Ben-Gurion, left Jerusalem on Wednesday afternoon when the Knesset weekly sessions ended. They went to Tel Aviv, where they remained until the coming Sunday, when they returned to Jerusalem in time for the weekly cabinet meeting. While in Tel Aviv, on Thursdays and Fridays they dealt with security matters and domestic political issues. If Israel's leaders viewed Jerusalem as their capital for half a week, why should foreign diplomats feel and act differently? Most of the resident foreign correspondents lived in Tel Aviv and had far closer ties with the IDF and the defense establishment than with the Foreign Ministry in Jerusalem. Therefore they tended to report more on foreign and security subjects than on education, culture, technology, social experimentation or even archaeology, to the distress of the Foreign Ministry that encouraged stories of a more "constructive" and "positive" nature.

Golda's daily schedule was packed with meetings, some of them dictated by other considerations. Sunday morning was devoted to the weekly cabinet meeting. On Mondays, Tuesdays and early Wednesdays she made a point of attending the Knesset plenary or committee sessions. She reported regularly to the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee where she spoke more openly, as this body was at the time leak-proof. Once a week, she chaired the Foreign Ministry senior staff meeting. She attended regularly meetings of "sareinu" (the Mapai ministers) and "havereinu" ("our comrades", meaning Mapai ministers, the party

secretary and its senior representatives in the Jewish Agency and the Histadrut). She attended meetings of Mapai's secretariat and its various sub-committees. The party discussions were usually held in Tel Aviv. She kept in close touch with her peers in the leadership of the state and the party—Levi Eshkol, Zalman Aranne and Pinchas Sapir, and had regular meetings with the head of the Mossad Isser Harel who was also a close political ally. A major subject in these political gatherings was how to block the rise of the younger leaders and what they sensed were their attempts to push the older generation from power and influence and to replace them in determining the future of Israel that was then barely ten years old.

Frequent overseas travel was also a major part of her life. She spent many hours in piston-engined planes (until 1960 when jet planes were put into service). Apart from the capitals of Eastern European countries, there was hardly a country with which Israel maintained diplomatic relations that Golda did not visit during her ten-year tenure as foreign minister. She managed to sleep on planes with the help of sleeping pills and arrived at her destination fresh. She enjoyed the travel, the honors bestowed on her and on Israel. Being open-minded and with a good sense of curiosity, she loved meeting new people and managed to impress her interlocutors as well as ordinary people. On occasion, she managed to squeeze into the tight schedule visits to museums and concerts. Each visit included a meeting with the head of that country, the foreign minister, with leaders of the Jewish community, press interviews and many public appearances where she did extremely well, especially in English-speaking countries. Her ability to persuade and convince people of her case and of Israel's cause was highly impressive. But this did not always translate itself into pro-Israel votes in the United Nations or its many organizations. Unlike in Israel, abroad she was the sole spokesperson for Israel.

At home she had little control over ministerial statements on defense and foreign affairs. The Israel government was made up of a coalition and each ministry was in fact an independent fiefdom of the political parties. The ministers who represented their parties thought this entitled them to express their views on any subject, foreign affairs and defense being the most popular themes. The government of Israel never spoke in one voice, which was obvious. But less obvious were various, and at times, contradictory statements by the Mapai ministers that caused confusion and embarrassment. After Dayan and Peres were elected to the Knesset in 1959—Dayan became minister of agriculture and Peres deputy defense minister, they thought they could speak openly and candidly on foreign affairs and defense and did so virtually every week. It became difficult to assess who spoke for Israel. When it came to the Middle East there was a broad understanding. But when it came to discussing Israel's European or American orientation,

the attitude towards the Soviet Union or ties with Germany, there were deep differences of opinion that reflected political differences and hidden struggle over influence and power in the leading party. No wonder that in this situation, the foreign minister looked for an independent arena, without outside interference, for an exciting and new subject. Inevitably, she came to the Third World, partly because her room for action in Western and Eastern Countries was limited and partly because working in the Third World and mainly in the African continent gave her a sense of return to pioneering. Africa became the main target of her activities and her major achievement in the decade she was foreign minister.

What attracted her to the Dark Continent? Before 1958, she never visited Africa and her knowledge about this continent was rudimentary. She knew that in one of his writings, Theodor Herzl, the founder of the Zionist movement, noted that once the Jews started resolving their problems, they would be bound to help oppressed people in Africa. She knew that the International Relations Department of the Histadrut attempted to establish contacts with Socialist leaders in Asia, but Africa seemed very remote from Israeli thinking in the early years of statehood for a simple reason: apart from a few countries, most of the territories were under European colonial rule, mainly British and French. Israel's Foreign Ministry had shown much interest in the Asian continent, mostly in the two giants—India and China, but was rebuffed. Few believed that the hostile attitude of India and China could be changed. Both supported the Arab position for economic, political and ideological reasons. The one who understood that Israel must also look closely at Asia was Moshe Sharett who began to train a cadre of Israeli diplomats by sending several of them abroad to learn Chinese and Japanese. He realized that within several years the nations of what became known as the Third World would be the leading force in the United Nations and Israel must consider whether it wanted to join this bloc or at least try to neutralize it from negative Arab influence. He also assessed correctly the growing role of foreign aid in international diplomacy and politics. For Golda, this world was unknown. But she was prepared to listen and to ask questions. The more questions she asked, the more she realized that Israel had acquired a limited, albeit useful and interesting, experience in foreign aid to a Third World nation—Burma. This country would become the role model for future activities in the African continent.

In its quest for deepening ties with India, Israel used all avenues to demonstrate presence in pan-continental events in Asia. One of them was the conference of Asian Socialist parties that convened in Rangoon in early 1953. Mapai was represented by Foreign Minister Sharett and the heads of the Histadrut's political department. Among them was Reuven Barkatt who was a sort of foreign minister of the Histadrut. They established ties with the Burmese Prime Minister U Nu and with some Indonesian leaders as well. One of the results of this conference was

the decision to establish diplomatic relations with Burma, and Rangoon became the second Asian capital in which an Israeli representative presented his credentials (the first was Tokyo in December 1952). The Israeli diplomat chosen to become Minister Plenipotentiary to Burma was David Hacoheh, one of the heads of Solel Boneh, a Mapai leader, relative of Yigael Yadin and Yitzhak Rabin. A highly engaging personality, Hacoheh was noted for his unorthodox and undiplomatic methods so admired by Ben-Gurion. Hacoheh by-passed normal diplomatic channels and went directly to the Burmese prime minister, offering him Israeli technical assistance. Burma displayed an interest and soon five Israeli “Spitfires” were sold and delivered with their armaments and technicians to maintain them. Hacoheh then started discussing the possibility of Israel helping in such fields as regional development, irrigation, shipping, fertilizers and chemicals. Burmese leaders began to display growing interest, a trait that would soon characterize the attitude of some African leaders towards Israel.

In the mid 1950’s, Israel was still known as a small, remote and poor country in the minds of many world leaders. But to Third World nations Israel was seen as a non-threatening entity. Israel did not ask of them political, economic or even strategic quid pro quo for its help. Israel was ruled by a Socialist party, but its economy was mixed, although direction came from the center. Above all, Israel possessed a small but highly effective army and began to develop extensive defense industries. The Burmese in the mid 1950’s and African nations from the end of that decade preferred not to turn to the superpowers or to the former colonial powers, tending to seek aid from small or medium-size countries such as Yugoslavia, and finally they came to Israel. Being a small and poor nation, Israel never thought in terms of large-scale aid, but one adapted to the needs of the recipients’ financial capability. And so it started. Israeli experts went to Burma and began to study various projects. But the expectations were too high and Israel could not deliver on its promises. There was also a major diplomatic setback. In March 1955, Israel was not invited to attend the first Afro-Asian Non-Aligned Nations conference that took place in Bandung. U Nu supported that an invitation be extended to Israel, but the Arab states threatened that if Israel attended, they would not. Their presence was far more important, at least in the eyes of India’s Prime Minister Nehru, than Israel’s participation. This was a major blow to Israel that demonstrated, if there was a need for such a demonstration, how isolated Israel was not only in the West but also in Asia. China rebuffed attempts to establish ties although Israel was one of the first nations to recognize the People’s Republic of China in January 1950 and even sent a trade mission for a visit in early 1955. India was not going to risk its ties with the Arab world by encouraging Israel’s presence in the sub-continent apart from a consulate in Bombay.

David Hacoheh continued to pursue his efforts to involve more Israeli experts and companies in various development projects in Burma. But soon it became evident that Israel over-extended its ability to provide the technicians and the budgets to implement the programs it recommended. Some of the projects were too grandiose, causing Burma to ask Israel to limit its involvement. There were some achievements. U Nu was the first prime minister in office who paid an official visit to Israel in May 1955, resisting massive Arab pressure to cancel this visit.<sup>8</sup> However, Israel did learn some lessons from its Burmese interlude. It was obvious that for such operations there was need for people imbued with pioneering spirit who could move things by overcoming bureaucratic hurdles. This was not a job for formally attired diplomats, but rather for people endowed with vision and imagination who could inspire the recipient government. It was clear that nonorthodox ways of doing things worked perfectly in Third World nations. Another lesson learned: Israel must never commit itself to large-scale projects that could not be implemented. Rather Israel must be satisfied with small austere projects applicable to a country with limited resources. It was soon discovered that Israel's major asset was her people, whose spirit and expertise were the hallmark of its contribution. Years later Golda told Billy Graham: "We go to Africa to teach and not to preach".

During the Sinai War, Israel's attention was obviously focused on the Middle East and Third World nations were the last thing on the mind of her leaders. In any case, most of the African nations had not yet gained independence. However, in the files of the Foreign Ministry there were some memorandums written by Moshe Sharett, in which he suggested that when the time comes and the African nations achieved nationhood, Israel should be ready to join their development plans from day one. In the course of and after the Sinai War, most of the Asian nations leveled vicious criticism at Israel mainly for joining sides with the two colonial powers in a war described as the last imperialistic war. They preferred to ignore the bloody suppression of the Hungarian uprising by Soviet tanks and did not see this as a Hungarian anti-Colonialist struggle against the Soviet oppressors. In the post-Sinai diplomatic struggles, most of the Third World nations voted against Israel. But when the dust settled, renewed evaluations undertaken by some Third World governments showed that right or wrong, on the battlefield Israel had proved its worth. Since some Third World nations were ruled by officers whose power rested on the military, they were interested in how Israel was organized to enable it to maintain an effective and efficient army and an extensive military infrastructure. From there, they asked more questions about Israel's socio-economic and industrial foundations and what could be learned from the Jewish state.

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<sup>8</sup> David Hacoheh, *Burma Diary*, Tel Aviv, 1963.

The Sinai-Suez war led indirectly to the rise of new forces in Asia and mainly in Africa, since one of its consequences was the fatal decline of the standing and prestige of Britain and France and their days as colonial powers in Africa were numbered. British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan later coined the phrase of the “winds of change” that began to blow in the Dark Continent. That was the opportunity Israel was waiting for. The old memorandums were lifted from the files and the experts realized how right Sharett had been when he had differentiated between Asia and Africa. The Asian world was the heir of ancient cultures and civilizations that originated in China and India and was proud of its heritage. This was absent in Africa because the European settlers did much to depress local culture. In Africa there were no giants like China and India. Those who opposed Israel’s first hesitant moves in Africa were the British and French who knew that soon they would have to abandon their colonies but at least hoped that they could preserve some economic and political interests in their former colonies. New nations would mean new armies, weapons, development, contracts, investments that could help the British and French economies. Why should they share this with others—it was asked in London and in Paris—certainly not with the Israelis who were seen as poor but highly effective upstarts.

For Golda, Africa was a new and exciting target, an unknown region where Israel could begin from scratch. The new African leaders had no prejudices against Jews or Israel. On the contrary, some of them had nothing but admiration for Israel and for its many achievements. The Arabs on the other hand could not offer much in the military and economic spheres. They were beaten twice by Israel in the last decade. Few Israelis tried, with less conviction, to tell African leaders that Israel, too, had fought against the British colonialists and forced them out of Palestine. In 1957, some plans began to emerge: first and foremost presence in some African capitals by opening consulates that would become embassies the moment these nations proclaimed their independence. For that there was need for British and French approval which was not easily granted. The first Israelis who went to Africa were mostly members of kibbutzim, Histadrut people and Solel Boneh experts. The first capitals chosen were Accra (Ghana), Lagos (Nigeria) and Nairobi (Kenya). Others headed to Liberia and Ethiopia, the only independent African nations apart from Arab and Moslem nations, such as Egypt, the Maghreb states, and South Africa. When the physical base was created, Israel turned to the second part of the plan—to bring the new and future leaders of Africa to Israel to learn about the Israeli model. Initially, the visits were arranged by the Histadrut and after 1957 by the Foreign Ministry. In 1957 and 1958, scores of young leaders from the African nations descended on Israel and had a close look at the kibbutzim, moshavim, the civilian and military industries, the Histadrut and its various enterprises, Israeli universities and research institutions, IDF installations and

Nachal battalions. Many of them met the foreign minister who evinced growing interest in the subject and was open to new ideas. She encouraged the African leaders to view Israel as their friend and to consult with its leaders and emissaries on every issue they wished to. One of her close associates later claimed that “soon we saw the human side in her political activities...the struggle of oppressed nations to rid themselves of their oppressors fit nicely in her humanistic and Socialist concepts. She saw the great reawakening in Africa as the first blooms of human freedom...The possibility of lifting the oppressed African woman hit a special chord in her heart”.<sup>9</sup>

She also realized that now she could prove that in certain areas the Foreign Ministry could perform well if only the others let it. She knew well that in Europe, America, the Arab and Moslem world, the Communist nations, attitude towards Israel were crystallized and it was virtually impossible to bring about a radical and quick change in the position of their governments. Efforts must be undertaken but one could not rely on miracles. Africa was virgin territory where Israel could have an influence from the first day. Golda also knew that in the coming years, international attention would be focused on the development of the Third World. This trend now became a norm in international relations and a country's ability to participate in this effort was part of her visiting card. Golda also preferred social and economic development to the traditional diplomacy of pacts, treaties and balance of power. The effort directed at the Third World would be humanitarian and noble. By its actions, Israel would be joining the respected club of nations that give and not only receive. For Israel, still smarting from its international isolation in spite of its victory in 1956, this would be a highly respectable opportunity to break the siege in peaceful ways and show the world that Israel possessed first class human resources that it was prepared to make available to needy nations with no conditions attached. In this arena, Israel would be able to act in relative independence, where she had a huge advantage over the Arabs and could prove its scientific, technological and organizational superiority. Naturally, Israel also had some concrete expectations: these nations would join the United Nations and would have a vote there on various issues including the Arab-Israel conflict. They would help Israel overcome its sense of international isolation and would help remove the stain of a pariah state that prevailed in some capitals. The African nations would also, hopefully, purchase from Israel machines, technology, seeds, chemicals and fertilizers, and even weapons. Israel would gain prestige and sympathy as a country that was giving and not one living off contributions and charity. The activities in Africa also possessed a psychological

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<sup>9</sup> Eilam, *Close to Golda*, p. 73.



boost to Israelis: here there were people who sought their help and wanted to learn something from Israel, which had been successful in so many areas. In the process Israel's experience in economics, society, cooperatives and the military might be emulated by the African nations. Israelis were very proud of their achievements and wanted others to be as impressed as they were.<sup>10</sup>

For their part, the African states saw in Israel a highly appropriate model that suited their needs. Israel would not pose a military or political threat, would not demand rewards and would help them in those areas where it had expertise, above all in what became known as “nation building”. One of the key problems facing the African states was how to create one central structure from the many tribes that existed during the colonial era. The new leaders sought to ensure and perpetuate their rule and tended to groom younger elements not yet benighted with tribalism. Israel offered help in the fields of pre- and para-military education, Gadna (youth brigades), Nachal and the Womens Brigades, and was also ready to train the special units that would protect the new presidents and their regimes. Israel offered setting up military and police academies as well as flying schools and man them with her trainers. The flow of experts that went from Israel to Africa was much smaller than that of trainees that came from Africa, Asia and Latin America to Israel. Some of them were selected because of their closeness to the ruler, loyalty to his regime and their ability to learn fast and teach others. The Israeli trainers came from the IDF, the Histadrut and the settlements movement. Golda was convinced they were the best and highly suitable from an ideological point of view, imbued with pioneering spirit and being the “beautiful Israelis”—people who could be relied on not to be corrupted and not to corrupt others whose aim was not to make quick financial gains as was the custom in those nations.

Nevertheless, Golda and Ben-Gurion, the latter showing limited interest in this endeavor, were not blinded by the enormous momentum that characterized the work in Africa. They knew it held vast moral importance for Israel, but would not help it solve its immediate and long-term problems. Africa could not provide immigrants, weapons and money. They correctly estimated that the effort was highly worthy, but in the overall context of Israel's foreign policy it remained marginal at best. But unlike relations with France, Germany and later the United States in the procurement of arms and other defense arrangements that were kept secret at the specific request of Israel, the French, the German and the American governments, the work in Africa could be publicized, thus giving the impression

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<sup>10</sup> On Israel's African policy see Michael Curtis and Susan Gittleson, eds., *Israel in the Third World*, New Brunswick, 1976; see also Aryeh Oded, “Israel and Africa—Historic and Political Aspects”; Hanan Einor, “Ethiopia and Israel” and “Relations with the Ivory Coast”, in Yegar et al., eds., *The Ministry for Foreign Affairs—The First 50 Years*.

that Israel's major effort was directed mainly to the Dark Continent. The reality was somewhat different. Israel used funds given by the industrialized nations but received the credit. For the Foreign Ministry, this became a central effort because it coordinated and implemented the work with little involvement from the Defense Ministry or the Prime Minister's Office. Soon the Defense Ministry awoke to the possibility of selling arms and providing military assistance and began to compete with the Foreign Ministry. But Golda put her foot down and Ben-Gurion was unwilling to resolve problems of who would deal with the Third World nations and the petty quarrels on authority and credit which she won.

And now the time had come to make her first visit to the continent. The opportunity arose during the African Nations Congress that was held in Accra in the summer of 1958.<sup>11</sup> The first stop on the way to Ghana was in Monrovia, Liberia's capital, where she was warmly received by President William Tubman. He told her why he had instructed his United Nations delegation to vote for partition in 1947. Several months earlier, during a visit to Washington, Tubman had been quizzed by a Congressional committee on working conditions in Liberia and as a result the United States temporarily cut off its ties with that country. Congressman Emmanuel Celler, a close friend of Golda's, explained to him how to present his case to Congress, which he did. He paid off his debt to the Jewish people in November 1947.

In Monrovia, Golda faced for the first time the huge gap between wealth and poverty, the glittering dinners, the uniforms and medals, the lavish palaces and the filth and suffering which was the lot of the majority of the people. This she wanted to change, but from the first, the key problem arose that would haunt Israel for years. The Israeli aid was aimed at raising the standard of living of the average African, but it was given through the ruling elite whose main concern was to ensure their rule and the perks it carried with it. The rulers did devote much of the aid to strengthen their military and police and to unite the nation. Very early it became evident that virtually all the new African nations were one party, one leader dictatorships headed by a supreme leader who was elected, albeit not exactly according to Western election standards. Usually Israel had to work through this leader and help him unite the country. Israel argued that during the first stages of independence the new leaders ought to be given the chance to build the nation's governmental infrastructure that might eventually lead them to a working democracy. In reality Israel, tied its aid projects to leaders the likes of Tubman, Kwame Nkruma (Ghana), Mobutu Sese Seku (Congo), Milton Obote (Uganda) and others. The alternative was to do nothing and abandon the field to

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<sup>11</sup> Ehud Avriel, "Some Minute Circumstances", in *Jerusalem Quarterly*, 1 (1980), pp. 34–41.

the Arabs. Israel chose to work with the existing leaders and try to influence them quietly behind the scenes.

While the reception in Monrovia was very warm, the atmosphere in Accra was visibly chilly in spite of the heat and humidity there. Kwame Nkruma feared that some of his peers, leaders of the struggle against French and British colonialism, would not view the visit of Israel's foreign minister favorably. They argued that scant two years earlier, Israel had fought alongside the two colonial powers against an African sister nation—Egypt. During their first meeting in his palace, Nkruma was not openly outgoing. Golda wanted to discuss joint projects and he, while complimenting Israel, did not want to make any commitments at that stage. His attitude angered Ehud Avriel, a senior Israeli diplomat and the living spirit behind the ties with Africa. Avriel recalled later: "He did us a favor by accepting our aid and gave a qualified approval to Israel by allowing us to hold his hand". The difficult conversation was rescued by George Padmore, one of the Congress leaders and a friend of Golda. He decided to take Golda to meet Ferhat Abbas, the representative of the Algerian National Liberation Front (FLN), the hero of the Congress. Abbas fired the first shot: "How can you accept arms from the devil himself? We know that De Gaulle is the main supplier of arms that you use against our close friends". Golda was not taken aback. She lit a cigarette and responded sadly: "Our neighbours aim to annihilate us and they received more weapons from the Soviet Union than they know what to do with and for free as well as from other sources. France is the only country that is prepared to sell us for hard currency some of the arms we need to defend ourselves from your friends. Even if De Gaulle was the devil himself I would be duty bound to buy arms from him to ensure that my people will not be destroyed again." This reply won applause. She answered to the point without using vague or diplomatic language. Other questions dealt with Israel's miraculous development and its ability to extend help.

The atmosphere in this and other future conferences showed her the general trend the African nations were to undertake in their relations with Israel. They would stress the bilateral ties, for them the most important, while they would generally vote against Israel in the United Nations and other international forums, together with the Arabs and other nonaligned nations, or at best abstain. For their part, they preferred informal ties instead of open identification with Israel, mainly on issues relating to the Arab-Israel conflict. Their dilemma was quite simple: on the one hand they wanted Israel's assistance that suited their needs and was warmly and unconditionally granted. On the other hand, since they belonged to the Third World bloc, they were duty bound to identify with the mainstream in that group that was basically anti-Israel. She spent hours trying to convince them that such behavior was immoral, not respectable or brave, thus hinting that some of their leaders did not show courage in the conduct of the international relations

of their nations. They did not view these remarks with favor and stressed that as far as they were concerned, UN votes were not that important, what counted were the special bilateral relations with Israel. Over time, Golda learned how to acquiesce with this attitude. Being pragmatic, she did not insist on maintaining her African policy on the basis of the principles of absolute justice and morality. She also ignored cases of special relationships that developed between senior Israeli officials and African leaders, based partly on giving special preference to the latter. In every Israeli forum where the relations with Africa were discussed, be it the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee, the cabinet, the plenary session of the Knesset, party and Histadrut bodies, she had to defend her policy and the double standards of some of Africa's leaders. While the Israeli media was quite impressed with Israel's achievements in Africa, it occasionally reported the seamy side of these ties and angered the foreign minister. She did not like criticism of her Africa policy lest they be harmed. Reasons of state was her main argument when she attempted to prevent uncomplimentary reports that were about to be published. Her claim was: "What do you want? This is the reality in the continent and we cannot change it". She compromised with her principles, she restrained her feelings and ordered her diplomats to go full speed ahead, expand the work and seek new financial resources in Europe and America. But this did not prevent her from instructing Israel's ambassadors in Ghana, Mali and Guinea to protest anti-Israel votes, such as the one that occurred in the January 1961 conference of developing countries held in Casablanca.

In spite of the broad policy of the African nations not to intervene in the Arab-Israel conflict, Golda succeeded in encouraging a number of African nations to initiate a call in the United Nations General Assembly for direct Arab-Israel negotiations. This initiative was greeted positively by Tanzania, Guinea, Mali, Chad and Senegal. Addressing the General Assembly on October 9, 1961, Golda called on Nasser to abandon the path of war and repeated Ben-Gurion's call for a face-to-face meeting with the Egyptian ruler anywhere, anytime and without prior conditions to negotiate peace. The draft resolution was tabled on December 20 but failed to win a majority even in the United Nations Political Committee, where it gained 34 in favor, among them 11 African nations and 12 Latin American. But 44 voted against and 24 abstained. The Africans supported the resolution partly because Golda decided to vote in favor of imposing sanctions on South Africa because of its Apartheid regime. But even this resolution failed to win two thirds of the required votes. Most of the European and North American countries voted against. The Pretoria government was highly resentful at Israel and relations with South Africa worsened.

The initiative was renewed on the eve of the 17<sup>th</sup> United Nations General Assembly that met in New York in September 1962. Israel prepared the ground

by inviting a large number of African leaders and their UN ambassadors to visit Israel and sent Israeli personalities to the continent to try and garner support. It appeared that while the initiative would overcome the hurdles in the Political Committee, it was bound to fail in the Assembly plenary, which would be seen as a small victory which lifted the spirit of the Israelis. But suddenly Golda had to cancel the initiative. She was asked by both President Kennedy and Secretary of State Rusk not to propose the initiative because a number of moderate Moslem states asked the United States to vote against it. President Kennedy could not accept the idea that his country would vote against a call for Arab-Israel peace. But he realized that if the United States would vote for, the Moslem-Arab bloc would vote with the Soviet Union against any American proposal, and therefore he asked Israel to remove the initiative from the agenda. He also hinted that the quid pro quo for this might be in the form of weapons. Red-faced Israeli diplomats had to explain this about face to the African delegates. This would be the last time Israel could mobilize their support in United Nations votes and they wondered how serious Israel was on this matter.<sup>12</sup>

Golda's growing sensitivities to the ties with the African nations led her to some unnecessary measures, such as cancelling El-Al flights from Lod to Johannesburg via Nairobi thinking it would be seen by Kenya as a positive step against the Apartheid regime. She was barely persuaded that this was a superfluous step. It turned out that while the South African government was insulted, the Kenyan government was not overly concerned with the landing of Israeli planes (and those of 20 other international airlines) in Nairobi on their way to Johannesburg. In an attempt to rehabilitate Israel-South Africa relations, the Zionist Federation of South Africa dispatched a delegation to Israel where they were told by Golda that "because of its history and ethics, Israel must adopt as a matter of principle a moral attitude on the matter of Apartheid... The Jewish people, that always sought justice, cannot accept its denial to others". She added that only because of the existence of an important and large Jewish community in South Africa, Israel did not sever its ties with that country.<sup>13</sup>

Five years after launching its African policy, Israel could chalk up a number of significant achievements. While in 1960 Israel had six legations in Africa, a year later it grew to 23, and at the beginning of 1972 reached 32. The United States had only 28 legations. The various aid programs were now operating smoothly, coordinated by the Department of International Cooperation in the Foreign Ministry. It was headed by Aaron Remez, the son of her friend David Remez who at

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<sup>12</sup> Hanan Einor, "Israel vs. Apartheid in the UN", in *Jerusalem Quarterly*, 1 (1986), pp. 35–41.

<sup>13</sup> Gideon Shimoni, *Israel, Jews and Zionism—the South Africa Experience, 1910–1967*, Capetown, 1980, p. 346.

one time had commanded the Israel Air Force. Golda knew him from his childhood and was sure she could trust him to carry out any assignment. The Department organized the dispatch of hundreds of Israeli experts and technicians who worked side by side in the field with their African counterparts and not from airconditioned offices, thus earning the respect of the locals. The Department also arranged for long- and short-term training courses in Israel ranging from a six-year full medical course to a short course on running national lotteries. The training was done by the Afro-Asian Institute of the Histadrut, by the International Institute for Training Communal Services that was established in Haifa by the Foreign Ministry, and the IDF. Israel acquired much international esteem and, even more important, foreign funding for this activity that enabled it to expand this work to the Asian and Latin American continents. Golda's name was synonymous with this policy and she was the major Israeli spokesperson in various international gatherings dealing with aid to Third World nations. On the academic level, the Weizmann Institute of Science, headed since 1959 by its new president Abba Eban, was also deeply involved in organizing a number of international congresses called the "Rehovot Conferences" that brought to Israel presidents, prime ministers, ministers and mainly scientists from scores of Third World nations.

However, the first indications of looming problems between Israel and some African nations emerged as early as January 1961, when Ghana's president Nkruma voted in favor of a radical anti-Israel resolution adopted in the Non-Aligned Nations conference in Casablanca, where the leading personality was Egypt's president Nasser. When the Organization of African States was established in 1963, it demonstrated an anti-Israel stance. It is likely that at this time the first, pioneering chapter in Israel-Africa relations already ended. The ties became more institutionalized but lost some of the zeal and excitement that had prevailed at the beginning. It was in many ways expected, but Israel was concerned over the speed of the development.

Golda devoted much time and thought to Africa. In December 1959, she attended the Independence Day celebrations of Cameroon, from there she went to Ghana and Togo, returned to Liberia, Sierra Leone and Gambia, and visited President Sekou Tourre of Guinea. In 1962, she traveled to Kenya and Ethiopia where she met the Emperor Haile Selassie, who a year earlier was saved by Israeli representatives in Addis Ababa from being deposed. A year later, she was back in Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda and the Malagassy Republic. In 1964, she attended Gambia's independence ceremonies and went on to Nigeria. The visits were physically and emotionally exhausting, but she was also filled with much satisfaction as she could see firsthand the progress and achievements due mainly to the Israeli experts. From those years until she died, she retained a special place in

her heart to the people and leaders of Africa, in spite of the fact that she knew the nature of their regimes and that Israel played a key role in perpetuating those regimes. Eventually, they would repay her efforts during Israel's worst time—the Yom Kippur War, by suspending diplomatic relations with Israel.

In the ten years she served as foreign minister, Golda had to deal with myriad of issues that were not dealt with by her predecessor, mainly because Sharett was deposed in 1956, before the Third World awoke and became an important factor in international relations. She was fortunate to head this ministry when Israel's international ties expanded dramatically. When she took over in 1956, Israel was represented in 45 countries, when she left in 1965, Israel's flag flew over 90 missions, a major achievement for a country that craved recognition and legitimacy. While she knew more about the United States and some Western European countries, she now had to learn three new continents—Africa, Asia and Latin America. Of the three, the one she least understood was Asia. She could never muster understanding for the mentality, culture and civilizations of this complex continent of which Israel was part of, at least geographically. She had to learn more about some of the Asian countries when it came to approving the establishment of legations in Cambodia, Ceylon, Thailand and Singapore. Apparently she made no special effort to understand the meaning and dimensions of Asian nationalism and communism. But she was intelligent enough to rely on the advice of the few Israeli experts who understood the developments in that continent. Among them were David Hacohen, Yaacov Shimoni, Eliashiv Ben-Horin and Daniel Lewin. In Asia, as in Africa, Ben-Gurion could not guide her or determine policy. He attempted to study Buddhism and even ensconced himself for several days to study Buddhist texts in a Buddhist Shrine during a visit to Burma in December 1961, to no avail. However, he did understand the need to bring Communist China into the community of nations, wrote a number of articles on this subject and correctly predicted the rapprochement between Beijing and Washington a decade before it occurred when President Nixon visited China in February 1972. But he was less interested in the smaller nations of Asia.

Golda's exposure to the Asian continent took place during a long and grueling trip to a number of countries there in March 1962. She was accompanied by her son and Foreign Ministry officials in charge of Asian affairs. The dense timetable did not enable her to delve in depth either into the regional problems or of those of individual countries she visited—Japan, the Philippines, Cambodia, Thailand and Burma (today Myanmar). Her rounds of meetings with the heads of state, that included Emperor Hirohito of Japan, the king of Thailand and the prime ministers and foreign ministers of the other nations, lacked warmth, although held according to strict rules of protocol. Israel was not seen as part of Asia and did not view itself as an integral part of that continent. Asia could

not provide the three main requirements of Israel—immigrants, weapons, and money. During her ten-year tenure as foreign minister there was no progress in relations between Israel and China nor India. She approved the sale of mortar shells to India when the latter fought China in the fall of 1962, but refused to do so when India fought Pakistan in the fall of 1965. She adamantly refused to take part in the Vietnam War in spite of Lyndon Johnson's attempts to involve Israel in this struggle, mainly to neutralize the growing opposition in the United States to that war. Johnson may have thought that if Israel could make a gesture that could be interpreted as helping the United States in Vietnam, even if that would be limited to medical aid, the American Jewish leadership that was becoming more vocal in its opposition to the war would tame its criticism. Golda realized the consequences and vigorously rejected any effort to draw Israel into that war that would consume America until 1975 and put so much pressure on Johnson, and led him to announce in March 1968 that he would not run again for the presidency in the coming elections.

Israel did have some setbacks in South East Asia. In the late 1950's, it had to remove an unofficial representative from Malaysia due to heavy Arab pressure on the government of that mainly Moslem nation. But ties with Singapore were excellent and Israeli experts helped Singapore build its army and among other things establish the Singapore Symphony Orchestra. Ties with other South East Asian nations such as Thailand, Laos and the Philippines were good since they asked only for Israeli technical assistance in irrigation and regional development. The same applied to Nepal. But they consistently voted against Israel in the annual session of the United Nations General Assembly. Japan, too, did not veer from its policy of strict adherence to the dictates of the Arab economic boycott, due mainly to its growing dependence on Arab oil. Golda realized that not much could be done to change this reality for the time being, and she had no time or patience to wait for a major change. The significant improvement of relations with the major nations of the Asian continent would have to wait until the 1990's and early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, due to the Oslo Agreements and peace treaties between Israel, Egypt and Jordan. The Asian nations did not require Israeli technical aid as did the African nations. This was a different world, and for Golda a sealed world. She admitted in her memoirs that in the Asian continent, she missed the vitality and drama that she connected with Africa. But she went through the motions. During every session of the United Nations General Assembly she went through the ritual of meeting as many foreign ministers as possible, including those from Asia. But there was little chemistry. They were not yet used to seeing a woman holding such a high-ranking position, although at the time there were two women in senior positions in the continent—Indira Gandhi and Sirimavo Bandaranaike, the prime ministers of India and Sri Lanka (Ceylon). In the course of one such meeting in



New York with the foreign minister of South Korea, they agreed on the opening of an Israeli legation in Seoul. That legation functioned there until Foreign Minister Moshe Dayan decided to close it and the Israeli Consulate General in Hong Kong for budgetary reasons in 1978. The Hong Kong consulate was re-opened in the mid 1980's and the one in Seoul in 1991.

Latin America was, in Golda's view, far more politically important and interesting than Asia. Golda remembered well the role played by the nations of this continent in the crucial partition vote in 1947. She met regularly with the Latin American foreign ministers in the General Assembly and realized that in those days, the Latin American bloc wielded much influence in the United Nations. Unlike Asia or Africa, there were large and vibrant Jewish communities in that continent, many of whose children immigrated to Israel. Shortly before the 1959 Knesset elections, she undertook a long journey to nine Latin American nations. It was mostly formal and designed to demonstrate Israeli presence in that continent and to thank the Latin American nations for their support for Israel since November 1947 and their willingness to establish diplomatic relations with Israel in its first year of independence. She used the opportunity to sign a number of agreements for cooperation in various spheres. On May 21, 1959, she met with President Arturo Frondizi in Buenos Aires. A week later she received an honorary doctorate from the University of Uruguay and signed a trade and finance agreement. In her honor and as a special gesture, the Uruguayan Senate approved the agreement within a week. In Mexico, she signed two cultural relations agreements. In Venezuela, the foreign minister awarded her with the Grand Medal of the Order of Liberation. But in Caracas she caused a diplomatic incident when she criticised Egypt during a press conference, a country that was due to host the next meeting of the oil producing nations, Venezuela being one of the more important such nations. The Venezuelan foreign minister rebuked her publicly, saying she had a tendency to interfere in matters she did not understand.<sup>14</sup> Three days later, the Venezuelan Foreign Ministry issued an official statement expressing regret over the incident and stressing the great respect its people and government held for Mrs. Meir who symbolized the struggle of Israel for freedom. In Brazil she was awarded an honorary citizenship of Rio de Janeiro and was hosted by President Joselino Kubicek. As was the custom, she chaired a meeting of Israel's diplomatic representatives to the continent held in Punta Del Este and concluded this tiring trip in Santiago, Chile's capital. She arrived by a regular commercial flight. Half an hour earlier, Indonesia's President Achmed Soekarno arrived on a special flight with an entourage of 80 people, including 40 women and 200 suit-

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<sup>14</sup> Ha'aretz, 24 June 1959.

cases. Golda was accompanied by one person, her special assistant Lou Kadar, and two suitcases. The next day the local press noted the huge gap between the president of a vast but poor country, some of whose population were regularly hungry, and the foreign minister of Israel. During her visit to Santiago, she taught the Chilean foreign minister a lesson in the Jewish tradition. She brought as a gift a pair of candlesticks and explained at length the importance of the Sabbath in Judaism and the special role of the Jewish mother on Friday night. The heads of the religious parties in Israel would have been amazed if they had known that she delivered such a lecture. Not being noted for her religious practices, on the contrary, they knew that she smoked and drove on the Sabbath and was not very particular about eating nonkosher food. But her audience in Santiago responded very positively. The Israel ambassador in Santiago reported that she was a Jewish mother speaking about how the adherence to religion kept the Jewish people alive.<sup>15</sup> There was always the Jewish angle in such visits: meetings with the heads of the local Jewish community, visiting Jewish schools, community centers and synagogues. In Buenos Aires she addressed in Yiddish some 20,000 Jews in the municipal stadium and each of them felt as though she was addressing him personally, or as one of them said: “she spoke from her heart to mine.”

Since there were no special problems between Israel and the nine countries she visited in this trip and there were no disagreements on matters of principle, the official discussions with the leaders she met focused on elaborating Israel’s position on the conflict: Arab refugees, freedom of navigation, the endless state of war and Israel’s desire for peace, and of course the Jerusalem problem over which there was much sensitivity in these Catholic nations who were very much influenced by the Vatican’s desire to internationalize Jerusalem under the supervision of an international body. Israel also sought to purchase oil from Mexico and Venezuela, to hunt Nazi war criminals and win the countries support at the United Nations and its various agencies. Golda’s interlocutors were by and large warm and polite, which was the habit of the place, but they did not go out of their way to make promises. Some of them mentioned the presence of large Arab communities, some of them of Palestinian and Lebanese background. Others claimed that if they remained neutral, this might even help Israel. They also asked that Israel refrain from asking that they make friendly statements in the United Nations since they had to take into account their membership in the developing countries group in that body. They also sought to avoid the impression that by helping

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<sup>15</sup> Eliezer Doron, *In the Diaspora and in Confrontation—From the Diary of an Israeli Ambassador*, Jerusalem, 1978, pp. 310–311. On relations with Latin America see Netanel Lorch, “Relations Between Israel and Ibero-America to 1972”, and Yoel Baromi, “Israel, the UN and the Latin American Nations, Musing on Years Gone By”, in Yegar et al., eds., *The Foreign Ministry*.

Israel they were bowing to American pressure on the Middle East issue. To their credit it must be admitted that they did not advise Israel on how to conduct its foreign policy and also expressed much interest in Israel's many achievements in various areas. During this visit, the foundations were laid for future cooperation in technical aid that Israel offered, that was more modest than to Africa, but no less successful.

Golda enjoyed this trip enormously. She was at the center of attention, and it being her first visit to this continent, her natural curiosity awoke. The formal events and social niceties, official dinners, receptions and cocktail parties that were part and parcel of such visits interested her little. She was far more interested in interacting with the local population, mainly the Jewish communities. There was another reason for her good mood in those days. She was away from Israel for several weeks and did not have to think about what was happening in her party, the coming Knesset elections and Ben-Gurion's plans for the makeup of the next cabinet. Even before she left Israel, she hinted that she would not continue as foreign minister and efforts were already underway to convince her to stay at this post. When she returned to Israel in early July 1959, Ben-Gurion did something rare for him—he came to the airport to greet her. She understood the transparent exercise, but deep in her heart enjoyed the special attention showered on her by the leader.

A year later she had to refocus her attention on a major nation in the Latin American continent—Argentina. The reason for that was the capture of the Nazi war criminal Adolf Eichmann in Buenos Aires by Mossad agents and his transfer to Israel to stand trial in Jerusalem. Ben-Gurion's announcement in the Knesset on May 22, 1960, about the capture of Eichmann and his removal to Israel electrified the nation. But the manner in which Eichmann was kidnapped and smuggled out of Argentina was against the laws of that country and its government could not remain silent over the violation of its sovereignty. Argentina took two measures: it declared the Israeli ambassador *persona non grata* and lodged a complaint with the United Nations Security Council over Israel's act. The government of Israel felt that the discussion in the Security Council was of such importance in terms of public relations and the need to explain why Israel took such an extreme measure that it decided to send the foreign minister herself to reply to the Argentinian arguments. On June 22, 1960, she addressed the Security Council and decided at once to admit that Israel's action was in total contravention to the laws of Argentina and that the government of Israel had already apologized to Buenos Aires for that act. This was the first opportunity for Israel to explain its position, the history of the Holocaust and Eichmann's role in it. Golda fully used the occasion to speak not only on behalf of Israeli Jews but also on behalf of the six million victims. At the conclusion of her statement, she mentioned the fact

that now there was a country whose agents succeeded in locating the war criminal who had been hiding for fifteen years after the war.

I am convinced that many in the world would be interested in bringing Eichmann to trial, but the fact remains that for fifteen years no one found him and he could violate the laws of who knows how many countries by entering them with a forged passport and a false name and exploit the hospitality of countries who I am sure would be revolted by his acts. But Jews, some of whom were themselves victims of his vile acts, did not rest until they found him and brought him to Israel—the country to whose shores came home hundreds of thousands of the remnants of the Eichmann horrors, the country that existed in the hearts and souls of the six millions, when they sang on the way to the crematorium the core of our religion: 'I fully believe in the coming of the Messiah.

At the conclusion of her statement, she said:

Is this a problem the Security Council should deal with? This is a body dealing with threats to peace. Is this a threat to peace—that Eichmann is being put to trial by that very nation towards whose physical destruction he devoted all his energies, even if the act of his capture was a violation of Argentinian laws? Or perhaps the threat to peace lay in Eichmann who was at liberty, who was not punished, Eichmann who was free to insert his distorted soul to the new generation?<sup>16</sup>

The next day, the Security Council censured Israel, and the incident was resolved when Israel apologized to the government of Argentina. The diplomatic ties were not harmed and Argentina never requested the return of Eichmann. On August 3, the two governments issued an official statement saying that they were driven by the need to comply with the Security Council resolution of June 23, 1960, and expressed hope that the friendly relations between the two countries would be advanced.

The Eichmann trial itself caused certain problems among international lawyers who doubted the legality of his kidnapping and mainly the fact that he was tried in Israel for crimes he committed not on its territory and long before its establishment. Ben-Gurion was determined that the younger generation of Israelis must know what had happened and ignored international criticism, some of which came from Jews worried this could intensify anti-Semitism in countries where they resided. Golda consistently supported Ben-Gurion's views and even sat in the courtroom on several occasions, stunned, often wiping away tears when she heard testimonies of survivors. During the trial, she met the well-known Jewish philosopher Hannah Arendt who covered the trial for the "New Yorker". Later it emerged that Arendt saw Golda as a domineering, proud and

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<sup>16</sup> Statement to the Security Council, 22 June 1960.

too American woman “representing the Zionist paganism”, as she said to Lenny Yachil, her hostess, and herself a leading Holocaust researcher. Eichmann was condemned to death. His appeal to the Israel Supreme court was denied. He then asked for clemency from the President of Israel Yitzhak Ben-Zvi who turned the issue over to the Israel government. The cabinet met for a special session at the end of May 1962, during which ministers voiced their opinions on carrying out the death penalty. Golda’s position was adamant: “There was a trial, there was a verdict under Israeli laws, this is what other nations did, the Poles with Rudolph Hoess, the Czechs with Dieter Visliceni...the Norwegians with Quisling. No one told them to display a higher sensitivity; this is sought only of us, because the world has not yet been accustomed to view Israel like other nations”. She may have thought of a letter written by leading Israeli intellectuals, among them Martin Buber, Gershom Shalom, Hugo Bergman, Akiva Simon and Leah Goldberg, who asked that Eichmann not be executed. Eleven ministers voted for execution, two thought that clemency with mark of Cain was preferable—Levi Eshkol and Yosef Burg. The saga was over on May 31, 1962, when Eichmann was executed and his ashes scattered over the Mediterranean Sea off Jaffa.

A key development that occurred during her term as foreign minister was a change in America’s attitude and policy towards Israel. In the course of this transformation, Golda Meir played an important role. In the years following the Sinai war, when America’s anger at Israel had not yet dissipated, she was careful to visit Washington at least once a year to maintain ties with the secretary of state. Once a year, Eban and she made sure to call on John Foster Dulles until he retired due to illness. She even managed to meet his successor Christian Herter. The events of the summer of 1958, when Israel was requested to permit the flying of British troops and supplies over its territory to Jordan when a threat arose to the stability of the regime in that kingdom, something that caused some tension between Dulles and Ben-Gurion—all this was still fresh in the minds of the Americans. But the Nasserist attempts to consistently undermine the regimes in Iraq, Jordan and Lebanon convinced the heads of America’s diplomacy that they might have been totally wrong in 1956 when they were not too far from suspending ties with Israel, that after all Israel was an island of stability in a Middle East increasingly under the influence of Nasser, who bound his fate to that of the Soviet Union. Golda was fully involved in Ben-Gurion’s effort to obtain arms from America, and although she was not convinced that the Eisenhower administration would be friendlier to Israel because of the weight of the past, she trusted much more the next president of the United States, young and vital, who was inaugurated in January 1961. One of John F. Kennedy’s first steps, as expected, was to reexamine America’s policy in the Middle East. In Israel, not all the leaders harbored many hopes regarding President Kennedy. The view was expressed by Ben-Gurion after

meeting with candidate Kennedy in New York in March 1960: “He is so young.” The new secretary of state, Dean Rusk, was not well remembered from 1948 when he had headed the United Nations bureau of the Department of State and at time expressed anti-Israel views. Golda was convinced that Israel must now seek ways to reach the young president.

At the end of the 1950’s, it was still obvious to Israel’s leaders that the United States was not yet ready to become Israel’s major arms supplier. Towards the end of the Eisenhower administration, Washington was prepared to sell Israel anti-tank artillery, but preferred for strategic reasons that European countries, mainly Britain and France, remained Israel’s major arms suppliers. From 1958, the Eisenhower administration wanted to lower the profile of its involvement in resolving the Arab-Israel conflict, was careful to maintain ties with both parties and encouraged Israel to trust the United Nations and hoped that over time the Arabs would eventually accept Israel’s existence. In March 1960, there was an attempt to change this policy. In the course of a private visit, Ben-Gurion met Eisenhower and requested that America supply Israel with ground-to-air missiles called “Hawk”. He explained that the Soviets had recently supplied Egypt with new weapons and Israel feared mostly a surprise aerial attack that would paralyze its air bases and leave her exposed with no aerial defense. He argued that the “Hawks” were not offensive weapons. No decision was made during this visit. Ben-Gurion explained the problem to the then-candidate John F. Kennedy when they met in New York in March 1960.<sup>17</sup>

Kennedy’s entry into the White House in January 1961 inspired the hope that the new president, not burdened by anti-Israel bias and holding no grudge against her leaders, would initiate a process that might lead to some American-Israeli rapprochement, mostly in the area of arms supplies and growing economic aid. Golda had met Kennedy when they shared the same platform in several Jewish events and trusted his honesty, integrity and openness. For his part, he was fully aware of the fact that he was elected by a slim majority and that American Jews played an important part in his victory at the polls and may have felt some obligation towards them. His contact man with the Jewish community was Meyer (Mike) Feldman, who became the central conduit for the open and often secret ties with Israel’s leaders. In the course of the Kennedy administration, there were ups and downs in Israel-America relations, but the improvement far overshadowed the difficulties. Golda was deeply involved in all these developments. Here she did not have to compete with the Defense Ministry. The ambassador to Washington, Avraham Harman, was her appointee and Ben-Gurion seemed to be less involved.

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<sup>17</sup> Bar-Zohar, Ben-Gurion, pp. 1393–1394.

The aging Israeli prime minister was by then showing signs of being remote from current developments and focused his attention on a few central issues. When it came to America, he allowed Golda to operate freely, as he let Peres run almost independently Israel's military ties with France and Germany. Shimon Peres was somewhat involved in the growing ties with Washington, but the political struggle was conducted almost exclusively by Golda Meir.

In early 1961, Ben-Gurion renewed Israel's request for the "Hawk" missiles and repeated it in a private meeting he held with Kennedy in New York in May 1961.<sup>18</sup> America's response was that it did not want to become involved in the arms race in the Middle East. However, when Israel supplied convincing evidence that the Soviet Union was constantly violating the delicate balance of military power in the region by supplying Egypt, Syria and Iraq with modern offensive weapons, and when it was obvious to America that Israel was unable to obtain a "Hawk"-like missile either in Britain or in France, a major change occurred in America's policy. The change may have been partly influenced by the United States' discovery by of Israel's activities in the Dimona nuclear center—activity that had been obtained by American spy planes in late 1960.<sup>19</sup> After a long examination that lasted almost six months, Kennedy reached the conclusion that there was no comparable weapon to the "Hawk" and that America should sell these missiles to Israel to obtain a number of goals. The first would be to calm the Israelis, allay their fears and prevent Israel from launching a surprise attack on her neighbors if she were convinced that they were about to attack her. The second goal was to maintain the regional balance of power to prevent a third Arab-Israeli war initiated by the Arabs. The third purpose was to try and persuade Israel not to develop nuclear weapons and the fourth was to signal to the Arab states that the United States was now more committed to guarantee Israel's existence and security than in the past. One of the first indications of the change in attitude were secret military discussions at the highest level between senior IDF and U.S. army officers for the purpose of exchanging assessments, evaluating the regional balance of power and Israel's military needs.<sup>20</sup> In the first meeting held in July 1962, the IDF

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**18** Bar-Zohar, Ben-Gurion, pp. 1388–1391. Golda and Ben-Gurion decided not to respond to the American ultimatum that demanded replies by midnight. See *ibid.*, p. 1391. On the nuclear issue see Avner Cohen, *Israel and the Bomb*, Tel Aviv, 1998; Goldstein, Eshkol; Bar-Zohar, Phoenix; Shlomo Ahronson, *Ben-Gurion—The Sinking Renaissance Leader*, Sede Boker, 1999.

**19** Spiegel, *The Other Arab-Israel Conflict*, pp. 106–110; on the Kennedy and Johnson correspondence with Israel's leaders on the nuclear issue see FRUS, volumes dealing with the years 1961–1968.

**20** Mordechai Gazit, *President Kennedy's Policy towards the Arab States and Israel*, Tel Aviv, 1983.

was represented by the head of its military intelligence, General Aharon Yariv. The IDF chief of operations, General Yitzhak Rabin, represented the IDF in the second meeting held in October 1963.<sup>21</sup>

In the course of the summer of 1962, Golda Meir was busy in a vigorous and secret effort to influence an immediate American decision on the sale of the “Hawk” missile. In August 1962, the White House concluded that the missiles should be sold without giving this move any publicity. Mike Feldman was sent to Israel under the guise of visiting the Weizmann Institute of Science. He met Ben-Gurion and Golda and informed them of the president’s decision to supply the requested missiles, but asked for total secrecy and said it would take time before the missiles arrived in Israel. They began to arrive in the fall of 1964. But the Americans decided also to gain some political mileage out of this sale. Shortly before the Congressional elections due to be held in November 1962, on September 27, 1962, the deal was leaked to the “New York Times”. Contrary to expectations, the Arab response to the sale was quite mild and America’s fear of vehement Arab reaction subsided. This was a historic breakthrough in Israel-America relations. Israel’s leaders noted that Israel was not required to make any concessions on other issues related to the Arab-Israel conflict such as territorial exchange or repatriation of Palestinian refugees. Later, arms supplies were linked to American demands relating to other issues, as will be seen later.<sup>22</sup>

On the issue of the Palestinian refugees, the discussions between Jerusalem and Washington were far less pleasant and often acrimonious. One of Kennedy’s first initiatives in the Middle East was how to deal with the resolution of this painful subject. Kennedy based his attitude on the implementation of article 11 of United Nations General Assembly Resolution 194 of December 11, 1948, that called for the return, at the earliest possible time, of Arab refugees to their homes and to live in peace with their neighbors. Those who would not choose that road should be resettled in Arab countries after they were properly indemnified. Kennedy thought that the refugee camps ought to be closed. After his inauguration, Kennedy decided to launch an initiative that would be carried out ostensibly under the United Nations. It was proposed that the Palestine Conciliation Commission, a moribund body set up in 1949 until its quiet death in 1952, be revived and an American personality should be appointed to offer concrete and practical suggestions regarding the refugees. Israel’s traditional policy was that the refugees issue be discussed and resolved only in the framework of peace negotiations with the Arab states. However, it was clear to all sides that it would be impossible

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<sup>21</sup> Yitzhak Rabin, *Service Book*, Vol. I, Tel Aviv, 1976, p. 114.

<sup>22</sup> Spiegel, *The Other Arab-Israel Conflict*, p. 113.



to move in one step from a state of total war to a state of total peace, and therefore the refugees issue would have to be disconnected from other elements of the conflict or a step-by-step approach adopted which was what happened after the after the 1973 Yom Kippur War.

In September 1961, the President of the Carnegie Institute for Peace, Joseph W. Johnson, was appointed by the Palestine Conciliation Commission to handle the matter on their behalf. The Arab position was vague, that of Israel—very cautious. Israel repeated its well-known position that the return of large number of refugees to their former homes would destroy Israel from within. Golda was very skeptical of the entire move. The fact that Johnson had at one time served in the Department of State did not endear him to her. After touring the region, he came up with the idea of a limited referendum among the refugees in a selective poll to see how many of them would want to return. Israel objected to the very idea. Golda argued that radical Arab leaders would pressure all the refugees to vote for their return, something Israel could not even consider. Israel asked for clarifications as to how would the referendum be held, under whose auspices, how many refugees would be involved. Surprisingly, the Jordanian government also objected to the idea. King Hussein feared that too few refugees would elect to return to their homes while the majority would want to remain in his kingdom thus increasing the danger to the stability of his monarchy.

When it became evident that Johnson's ideas were supported by the State Department, Israel was alarmed. American diplomats, mainly those working in the Bureau of the Middle East and South Asia, suggested that the idea be secretly discussed with the Israelis so that they might agree even to some of its principles. On August 19, 1962, Feldman held a six-hour meeting with Ben-Gurion and Golda in Jerusalem in which he told them of the decision to sell Israel the "Hawk" missile, eliciting an excited reaction. Ben-Gurion even said that if there was a total regional disarmament, Israel would have no need for the missiles and asked that Nasser be informed. The prime minister also promised that Israel had no intention of producing fissionable material for atomic bombs and he would allow American representatives to visit the Dimona nuclear facility. Feldman asked Israel to respond positively to individual requests by refugees to return. Feldman felt that the Israelis were highly skeptical of the idea. They wanted to know in advance the Arab reaction and how it would be possible to prevent pressure from being exerted on refugees to vote in favor of return. They also rejected out of hand any United Nations involvement in the referendum and return. The American diplomats who read Feldman's report understood that Israel did not reject the entire plan and were waiting for the response of Nasser and King Hussein. Nasser, too, did not reject the plan outright, but was not very enthusiastic and made no commitment to accept it.

Meanwhile, Johnson decided to present his plan to the United Nations General Assembly session that opened in September 1962. Israel had seen an early draft of the plan and in a meeting in New York that month with Feldman, Golda pointed out 62 deviations from the original plan that she had been handed in Jerusalem. Johnson thought that the United Nations would have the final say on the plan even if Israel rejected it. Finally Israel decided that it would allow the plan to die a slow and quiet death without her being accused of sabotaging it. Israel once again relied on the Arabs to torpedo the entire move, and they came through as expected. In October 1962, Syria turned down the plan while the other Arab states did not give a clear-cut answer. In her meeting with President Kennedy on December 27, 1962, the president told Golda that while the United States would continue to act to implement a plan to deal with the refugee issue, “there has been no progress on the Johnson plan and its over”. The plan was never made public and its existence was known to just a few. Israel won this battle due to Arab opposition and the disunity in their camp, but mainly because of Ben-Gurion’s and Golda’s determined opposition on a matter they saw as existential to the integrity of Israel. They were prepared even to forego military and economic aid if it was conditioned on the acceptance of the Johnson plan, and indeed some officials in Washington did recommend imposing it on Israel.<sup>23</sup> Even the French Foreign Minister, Couve de Murville, who had already been informed by Golda of the plan in June 1961, said the entire world knew that Israel could not absorb a large number of refugees.

On other matters Israel gained a much more positive attitude. One such major item was the construction of the National Water Carrier between 1958 to 1964 and the utilization of the water from the River Jordan. In 1953, the Eisenhower administration had pressured Israel to change its plans for the construction of the National Water Carrier and instead of pumping water from the Jordan River in the area of the Daughters of Jacob Bridge, part of which was in the demilitarized zone as determined in the Israel-Syria Armistice Agreement, the United States agreed that Israel could pump water from the Sea of Galilee, which was wholly under Israeli sovereignty, and use it to irrigate other parts of Israel, chiefly the arid Negev. The Israel-America understanding on the water issue was that Israel would go ahead and construct the carrier with no publicity, while Washington would support Israel if the Arabs tried to sabotage the plan. Tight censorship was imposed in Israel on this matter and the first official statement that confirmed the existence of this huge enterprise was issued in late 1964 in the form of a news release by the spokesman of the Ministry of Agriculture. He stated that in the coming year, the

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<sup>23</sup> For details of this affair see *ibid.*, pp. 110–117.

farmers of Israel would have access to certain amount of water, some of it from the National Water Carrier. At America's insistence, there was no publicity when the Carrier was inaugurated in a ceremony held at the pumping station in June 1964. The ceremony was held around the time Prime Minister Levi Eshkol was on a state visit to the United States and could personally express Israel's gratitude for America's help in completing this vast development enterprise. When Syria and Lebanon did try to interfere with the Jordan River waters by attempting to divert two of the head waters of the Jordan, Israel responded by artillery fire followed by air strikes that destroyed the Arab equipment in October 1964. The United States asked Israel to restrain itself, fearing mostly for the very fragile regime in Lebanon.

Her crowning achievement in promoting Israel-America relations came during a long conversation Golda had with President Kennedy at the Kennedy estate in Palm Beach, Florida on December 27, 1962. She started the conversation by introducing Israel's position concerning recent developments in the Middle East, mainly the issue of balance of military power. Her arguments were a mix of emotions and reason. She decided to teach the young president a lesson in Jewish history in order to explain why Israel must survive. She started by telling Kennedy what happened to many other ancient people who lived in the Middle East and were oppressed by foreign powers.

'Like these other peoples,' I said, 'the Jews had their land occupied by foreign powers. But the fate of the Jews was very different, because, of all these nations, only the people of Israel were determined to remain what they were. The people of other nations stayed in their lands but abandoned their identity, while the Jews, who were dispersed among the nations of the world and lost their land, never let go of their determination to remain Jewish—or of the hope of returning to Zion. Well, now we are back there, and that places a very special burden on the leadership of Israel. In many ways, the government of Israel is no different than any other decent government. It cares for the welfare of the people, for the development of the state and so on. But in addition, there is one other great responsibility, and that is for the future. If we should lose our sovereignty again, those of us who would remain alive—and there wouldn't be very many—would be dispersed once again. But we no longer have the great reservoir we once had of our religion, our culture and our faith. We lost much of that when six million Jews perished in the Holocaust.'

Kennedy did not take his eyes off me and I went on: 'There are five and a half or six million Jews in the United States. They are wonderful, generous, good Jews, but I think that they themselves would be the first to agree with me if I say that I doubt very much whether they would have the tenacity which those lost six million had. And if I am right, then what is written on the wall for us is: Beware of losing your sovereignty again, for this time you may lose forever. If that should happen, then my generation would go down in history as the generation that made Israel sovereign again, but didn't know how to hold on to that independence.'<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> For the protocol of the Meir-Kennedy conversation see Meir, *My Life*, pp. 226–227; Gazit, *President Kennedy's Policy*.

Kennedy came to that meeting armed with a long explanation of America's new Middle East policy. It is not clear to what extent Golda's arguments influenced him. It can be assumed that he decided prior to that meeting to tell Israel's leader America's new assessment of the region and what it was about to do. The president spoke logically, and the protocol showed that he was well prepared. He said that the special relations between Israel and the United States could be likened to the special ties America had with Britain on various issues, but the United States must retain its ties with the Arab world in order to to be effective and to assist Israel. He said that in order for that to happen, the United States must nurture sovereign nations in the region that would be tied to the West. In this manner America could clarify to the Arabs that it would maintain its friendship with Israel and even provide her with guarantees for her security. Kennedy also hinted that in case of emergency, the United States would activate the Sixth Fleet in the Mediterranean, and if there was an Arab invasion, America would come to Israel's help.

Kennedy requested that Israel understand the responsibility America bore in other regional matters and asked for Israel's awareness and cooperation because "due to the partnership with it there are pressures on America in the Middle East". Israel's security depended not only on America but on how Israel would act towards the Arabs. Actually, he spoke of an unwritten partnership and an informal alliance. Several months later, he confirmed this policy in a personal letter to Prime Minister Levi Eshkol in September 1963. Golda returned to New York much relieved. She understood that even if there could be no public announcement of America's new policy, the president did speak clearly of a major change in the relations between the two countries and Israel now had an alternative to France and Germany. The United States could no longer back away from its commitments to Israel, but it would also demand of Israel an understanding of America's relations with the Arabs.

Golda was in America when Kennedy was assassinated and together with President Shazar she represented Israel at his funeral. In the course of a reception at the White House after the funeral, the new president, Lyndon Johnson, told her that he knew that Israel had lost a friend but asked that it see a friend in him as well. At that reception, President Charles De Gaulle made his way towards Golda, shook her hand warmly and said loudly in English: "I am charmed to see you again, even in these tragic circumstances".<sup>25</sup> She knew Lyndon Johnson from the days when he opposed American sanctions on Israel in early 1957 when he was the Democrats majority leader in the Senate and consistently supported Israel.

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<sup>25</sup> Meir, *My Life*, p. 228.

Both of them took part in a conference of the American Peace Corps in Puerto Rico in 1962 when he was vice president and their friendship deepened. She admired his simplicity, warmth and quick grasp and he respected the “school teacher from Milwaukee” for the very same qualities.

The warming relations between Israel and the United States reached a new level in 1963 and 1964. Even before his assassination, President Kennedy agreed to host Prime Minister Eshkol on an official visit to the White House due to take place in April 1964. This would be the first time that an Israel prime minister would visit Washington as an official guest and be received with full honors: 21 gun salute, playing of the national anthems, a White House lawn reception and a formal state dinner. When Eshkol traveled to America in June 1964, it was decided that Golda would not accompany him. Perhaps she or he feared that she would overshadow him. She was prepared to leave Eshkol the center stage and strengthen his standing and image because of attacks on him already leveled from Ben-Gurion’s quarters. One of the major subjects discussed in the Johnson-Eshkol talks was the supply of offensive weapons to Israel, mainly tanks and fighter-bombers. Until then, Israel acquired American-made Patton tanks from Germany and Centurion tanks from Britain. This led to a dispute. The State Department opposed the direct sale of tanks to Israel, arguing this would upset the highly sensitive balance of power and make the United States the major arms supplier to one of the warring parties. The National Security Adviser suggested asking from Israel a commitment that it would not develop missiles and nuclear weapons in return for American supply of missiles, tanks and planes. Israel’s position was explained by Eshkol and was also helpful to Johnson’s upcoming presidential elections due to be held in November 1964. Johnson needed Jewish votes and sought a compromise. It was agreed that Israel would continue to receive American tanks through Germany. The tanks would be refurbished in Italy, a convoluted process that Eshkol referred to as “tunnel revolving”. If, for some reason, Germany would have to suspend the supply of tanks, the United States would do so in her place. In return, Israel agreed to visits by American experts in the nuclear facility of Dimona, something that Ben-Gurion had already agreed to in 1961.<sup>26</sup>

This was a major achievement for Eshkol, but it was dependent on two things: maintenance of strict secrecy and Germany’s agreement to this arrangement. Germany had begun to sell arms to Israel in 1959, following a number of visits by Shimon Peres to that country and the establishment of special secret

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<sup>26</sup> On the Eshkol visit see Peres, *David’s Sling*, pp. 67–85; see also Goldstein, Eshkol, and Bar-Zohar, *Phoenix*.

military ties between the defense ministries of both countries. An all-party parliamentary committee in the German Bundestag approved the German arms sales to Israel. The Germans feared that if the agreement was leaked to the media, the Arabs would wreak revenge on them by recognizing East Germany. If that happened, West Germany would have to activate the “Hallstein Doctrine” and cut off diplomatic ties with the Arabs. This is what happened in early 1965. There was a leak due to a mishap. A tank carrier had an accident in Italy and questions were asked about the origins of the tanks and their destination. This caused turmoil in Arab capitals and the German chancellor, Ludwig Erhard, had to tell Israel that Germany was suspending the tank supply and offered instead diplomatic relations. Israel turned to the United States and Lyndon Johnson, true to his word, agreed to the direct supply of American tanks to Israel. But the price demanded was quite heavy. The United States feared that Jordan, at the time also seeking tanks, would turn to the Soviet Union if it did not receive American tanks that were intended, as King Hussein explained to the deputy director general of the Israel Foreign Ministry Ya’acov Herzog in secret meetings in London, to defend his kingdom.<sup>27</sup> Israel became alarmed and told America that the sale of modern American tanks to Jordan would undermine the very fragile balance of power and place Israel in danger. To sweeten the deal, Johnson decided to send Averell Harriman to Israel, former governor of New York and now assistant secretary of state for political affairs. Harriman knew Golda well from previous occasions and did not think he would encounter a tough Israeli position on the tanks issue. He came with Robert Komer of the National Security Council and held long talks with Eshkol, Golda and Peres. The American foreign policy documents relating to that year were published in 2000 and reveal in detail the talks in Jerusalem.

Israel was requested not only to agree to the sale of American tanks to Jordan, but to pacify Israel’s supporters in the United States, a polite reference to the American Jewish leadership and their friends in the House of Representatives and the Senate. Israel was also offered additional weapons—jet fighters. In a highly unpleasant conversation on February 26, 1965, in Eshkol’s office in Jerusalem, Harriman stressed that the president understood Israel’s concerns and her need to maintain deterrent force, but if Jordan did not receive the tanks

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<sup>27</sup> Yossi Melman, *Hostile Partnership—The Secret Ties between Israel and Jordan*, Tel Aviv, 1987, pp. 57–58; see also Bar-Zohar, *The Life and Death of a Jewish Prince—Dr. Yaacov Herzog, the Biography*, Tel Aviv, 2003; Avraham Avichai, ed., *His Life Story*, in *History of Jerusalem in the Modern Time, a Memorial Book of Yaacov Herzog*, Jerusalem, 1981, pp. 11–65; see also Moshe Zak, *Hussein Makes Peace: Thirty One Years on the Road to Peace*, Ramat Gan, 1996.

the dangers to Israel would be multiplied and become more severe. Eshkol and Meir were close to a boiling point when Harriman asked them to intercede with American Jewish leaders. Instead they demanded that the supply of American arms to Israel be made public, parallel to those destined for Jordan. The Americans refused, fearing adverse Arab reaction. Israel also asked for America's support in her struggle against the Arab attempts to divert the head waters of the Jordan River in response to the activation of the National Water Carrier. The Americans suggested that Israel turn to the United Nations, knowing full well that such an idea was seen as insulting in Golda's eyes. Harriman warned Israel from launching a preventive strike on the Arabs even if the United Nations failed to act. Golda literally jumped from her seat saying that America had backtracked on its commitments. Harriman's response was that Israel should not underestimate the Security Council. The discussion rose to high tones and Eshkol claimed that Harriman had left him with nothing since the United States was already committed to supplying tanks to Jordan. Aryeh Levavi, the director general of the Israel Foreign Ministry who participated in the talks, later recalled that on the nuclear issue, Harriman said that the United States would come down on Israel like a "ton of bricks", an expression not acceptable to Golda Meir. Harriman returned to Washington leaving Komer behind to complete the negotiations that resulted in a series of secret understandings reached on March 10, 1965. These were attained by the Israeli team that consisted of Prime Minister Levi Eshkol, Foreign Minister Golda Meir, Deputy Prime Minister Abba Eban, Deputy Defense Minister Shimon Peres, Chief of Staff Yitzhak Rabin and senior officials including Ya'acov Herzog, since 1965 the director general of the Prime Minister's Office, and Aryeh Levavi, his counterpart in the foreign ministry.

A top secret Memorandum of Understanding was signed between Israel and the United States. The latter once again made a commitment to maintain Israel's independence and territorial integrity and to ensure its security. Israel made a commitment not to be the first nation to introduce nuclear weapons to the Middle East. America obligated itself to continue and discuss with Israel on all matters pertaining to Israel's deterrent capacity. Israel gave a tacit agreement to the sale of American tanks to Jordan while King Hussein, for his part, gave his word of honor that these tanks would never cross the Jordan River into the West Bank and would remain forever on the East Bank of the Jordan. The United States agreed to sell Israel fighter jets if Israel was unable to purchase them in Europe. This was the beginning of the "Skyhawk" deal that initially included 48 planes. It was approved by President Johnson in February 1966 and made public in May 1966. The first planes arrived in Israel after the Six Days War and played a major role in the War of Attrition that followed the Six Days War. The United States also promised to complete the delivery of the tanks, which was

stopped by the Germans in 1965. That included 150 Patton tanks that played a key role in the Six Days War.<sup>28</sup>

At the end of 1965, the Jordanian-American tank deal was consummated. King Hussein asked his contact man in London to arrange for another meeting with a senior Israeli leader. Dr. Ya'acov Herzog, who had met the king in London in 1963, made arrangements to hold the meeting in Paris, this time with the foreign minister of Israel. The meeting was held in November 1965 in the home of a wealthy French Jewish family in Paris. Golda flew to France especially for this meeting. There was no publicity. The meeting was attended by the king and Golda. The meeting got off by both recalling the late King Abdullah. Golda remembered her two meetings with him in 1947 and 1948, while the king spoke longingly of his grandfather. The Jordanian monarch explained Jordan's fragile situation, then threatened by Nasser who was constantly seeking to undermine the position of the king. Syria and the Palestine Liberation Organization also sought his downfall. He asked Israel to help him complete the tank deal with America, an agreement already given in Jerusalem earlier that year. He once again promised that the tanks would never cross the Jordan River and not be used against Israel. Golda asked for concrete commitments and not just oral promises. The king promised that he would give his commitment in writing to President Johnson. He also promised that Jordan would not be a party to interfering with Israel's water projects while Golda promised that Israel would pump water from the Jordan according to the quantities determined in the 1955 Eric Johnston plan. Hussein also asked Israel to exercise restraint by not undertaking retaliatory operations against Jordan in response to renewed Palestinian incursions from the West Bank. He accused Syria of heating up the situation and asked that Israel understand his very sensitive situation. Two years later, Israel seized scores of American-made Patton tanks in the West Bank in the course of the Six Days War. Hussein's promises proved to be worthless. On many occasions after that war, Golda referred to the worth and value of royal promises as an indication that the word of Arab leaders was worthless, even if they were made by a king.<sup>29</sup> But the meeting between the king and Golda led to a number of unwritten Israeli-Jordanian understandings that included Israel giving advance warnings to the king concerning plots on his life, on pumping water from the Jordan and above all the desire to avoid border incidents. Some of these understandings were still in force when Rabin and King

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<sup>28</sup> On the discussions see Spiegel, *The Other Arab-Israel Conflict*, pp. 131–136; see also Aryeh Levavi, "The Harriman-Komer Mission", Mordechai Gazit, "Early Road Signs on the Way to Strengthening the Israel-America Security Ties", and Hanan Bar-On, "Five Decades of Israel-American Relations", in Yegar et al., eds. *The Foreign Ministry*,

<sup>29</sup> Melman, *Hostile Partnership*, pp. 60–61.



Hussein signed the Israel-Jordan peace treaty in October 1994. Golda would meet the king ten times when she was prime minister, the last time in March 1974, several weeks before she resigned.

One of the most sensitive issues that kept Israeli leaders awake at night had its origins in 1960 and pertained to the secret Israeli construction of the nuclear plant in Dimona. This topic was never really publicly discussed in Israel. The publication of American, French, and some Israeli diplomatic documents as well as the book by Avner Cohen called “Israel and the Bomb” which was published in 2000 brought to light the enormous tensions between Israel and France, but mainly between Jerusalem and Washington, that threatened to undermine Israel-America relations. Foreign Minister Meir was not involved in the contacts with France that led to the signing of a nuclear cooperation agreement on December 12, 1956 and an additional, more detailed agreement signed on October 30, 1957. In the December 1956 agreement, France agreed to supply Israel with a 25 megawatt nuclear plant and loan Israel, starting in 1960, 385 tons of natural uranium. The first ten tons would be supplied in 1960 and 45 tons over the ensuing five years. France insisted that the plant would be only for peaceful purposes and that the spent material would be returned to France. The October 1957 agreement dealt with the construction of the Dimona Nuclear Plant that began in 1958 and the construction of a plutonium separation plant. An additional secret agreement signed by Shimon Peres and the French Prime Minister Bourges-Maunory in 1957 detailed the Franco-Israeli cooperation in research and the production of nuclear weapons. Details of this deal were made public when the French Foreign Ministry published their diplomatic documents covering the year 1959. Also, in the summer of 1959, details of the Franco-Israel nuclear understandings were made known to President Charles de Gaulle. It emerged that the 1957 agreement was in the form of a memorandum from the French Foreign Ministry to the Israeli embassy in Paris. The Israeli ambassador in Paris signed that he had received the document. Israel made a commitment that the nuclear facility would be used solely for peaceful purposes. If there was a change in the positions of the parties and one of them decided to end the understandings, the used materials (uranium and plutonium) would be returned to their rightful owner, namely the French Atomic Energy Commission.

In the secret discussions held by the key Israeli decision makers on this activity, two camps emerged. The first, headed by Ben-Gurion and Peres, supported the construction of the facility in all its ramifications. The second camp, headed by Golda Meir and supported by Levi Eshkol, Pinchas Sapir, Abba Eban, Yigal Allon, and even Yitzhak Rabin, saw the project as costly and risky. Golda was aware that it could poison Israel-American relations and argued that it would be impossible to hide for any length of time the existence of the facility. Eshkol and

Sapir were terrified of the huge costs involved. Moshe Dayan was skeptical about the effectiveness of the project while Rabin did not want anything to endanger American arms supply.

But even before the Americans woke up, there occurred a major change in the policy of France. Once installed in the Elysee Palace, newly elected President De Gaulle sought to restore to France its past senior position it had had in the Middle East and to seek ways to balance the special Franco-Israel relations with a tilt towards the Arabs. They would also help him terminate the Algerian uprising that was bleeding France and led to his accession to power. Furthermore, he was unwilling to endanger his ties with America over the French help for Israel to construct the Dimona plant. He asked for details, which were supplied to him by Francis Perran, the head of the French Atomic Energy Commission, in a memorandum that he sent De Gaulle in July 1959. On March 18, 1960, De Gaulle headed a meeting of the French cabinet where it was decided to suspend the supply of uranium to Israel at once. At a later cabinet meeting, this time chaired by Prime Minister Michel Debre (grandson of a former chief rabbi of Paris) that took place on May 12, 1960, it was decided to request Israel to agree to an international supervision of the Dimona plant. Until such time the uranium shipments would be suspended. In their June 17, 1960, conversation, Ben-Gurion pledged to De Gaulle that Israel had no intention of developing nuclear weapons, but Israel rejected the idea of international inspection and supervision. It was finally agreed that the 1957 agreement would be annulled, the French engineers and technicians already engaged in building the facility would complete their task and return home and that France would supply what it had promised to Israel. In this manner, the issue was resolved with France. Golda was a full partner to the contacts with the French government and was fully informed of the developments by Israel's ambassador to France Walter Eytan. In the discussions she even went further and said, according to Peres's biographer, "in stunning naïveté, that Israel must reveal to the Americans all the details of the plants' construction". Perhaps in 1960 her position was seen as naïve, but in retrospect this is exactly what she did nine years later when she reached quiet understandings with President Nixon about Israel's nuclear activities. These understandings remain to this day the foundation of the American policy regarding Dimona. Golda understood that Israel must never lie to America about such a sensitive issue and that no one in Washington would in any case believe Israel. Her position was that once you revealed the true meaning of Dimona, then you could argue with the Americans in Washington, an arena and some of its personalities she was very familiar.

Her fears came to pass when, at the end of 1960, Israel found itself embroiled in a serious crisis with the United States. An American spy plane had already taken aerial photos of Dimona in 1958, but in late 1960 they accumulated more

information on the progress of the construction in Dimona. On December 18, 1960, John McCone, head of the American Nuclear Energy Commission, confirmed that Israel was secretly building a nuclear plant. Pressure on Israel to reveal its plans and intentions now became more intensive. This forced Ben-Gurion to address the Knesset and to admit that Israel was indeed building a nuclear facility for peaceful purposes. But this did not satisfy the Americans. On January 3, 1961, two weeks before the inauguration of the new president, Ogden Reid, the American ambassador in Israel presented Golda Meir with a series of questions: what were Israel's plans, what did she intend to do with the plutonium, would she agree to international inspection, would she agree to visits by inspectors of the International Atomic Energy Agency, was Israel building additional facilities and was she prepared to announce that she had no intention of producing nuclear weapons. The Americans demanded an answer by midnight. The reply was given orally by Prime Minister Ben-Gurion himself. In harsh tones Ben-Gurion said that Israel was not an American satellite and that America must talk to Israel as an equal or not at all. Ben-Gurion decided to discuss the matter with President Kennedy who displayed much interest in preventing the proliferation of nuclear weapons. In their conversation in New York in May 1961 Ben-Gurion agreed to visits by American inspectors. But as the construction of the plant was being completed, the Kennedy administration fears of its possible military use mounted. It decided to press Ben-Gurion, and after June 1963, his successor Levi Eshkol, to allow additional visits and to make a commitment that Israel would never develop nuclear weapons.

Golda Meir was not directly involved in the exchange of letters between Ben-Gurion and Eshkol and Kennedy. But she knew their details and read the correspondence, met often with the newly appointed American ambassador Walworth Barbour, and was kept up to date by the Israeli official who drafted the Israeli letters—Gideon Rafael. She was a full participant in all the discussions held in Eshkol's office after he assumed the premiership in June 1963 and we have seen that she played a key role in the discussions that led to the March 1965 Memorandum of Understanding.

Israel's European policy was consistent during Golda's ten-year tenure as foreign minister. She focused on several key issues: immigration of Jews, mainly from Eastern Europe, and primarily from the Soviet Union, Jewish immigration from the three French North African holdings that were on the eve of obtaining their independence, acquisition of weapons mainly from France, Britain and Germany and finally the Israeli efforts to integrate into the two highly important European frameworks—the Common Market and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). The Common Market (also known as the European Economic Community, EEC) would grant Israel many economic benefits and would become

the main market for Israel's agricultural produce and her emerging innovative industries. Israel's integration as a full member or any other status would be a major blow to the Arab economic boycott and would help Israel establish itself as an economic power in the continent. In 1964, Golda left on a long journey to a number of European capitals to lay the foundations towards the opening of negotiations that were due to begin in June 1964. She set out ostensibly to soften the position of the heads of European governments and to argue that they had a moral obligation to Holocaust survivors to strengthen Israel's economy. She also stressed the economic benefits that would accrue to the EEC nations by cementing their ties with Israel. The protocols detailing her conversations with various foreign ministers in Europe, mainly those of Italy, France, Belgium, and Holland, showed how seriously she took this task, the extent with which she studied the issues in depth, went into minute details and showed exceptional knowledge in such issues as customs, quotas, import and export regulations and other similar complicated matters. No one had to teach her how to use the sentimental argument. The timing of her trip to Europe was also convenient. In 1964, Israel's standing and image in Europe had improved considerably. Ben-Gurion's retirement somewhat relieved the tensions under which Israel lived, and the heads of Europe saw his successor as less doctrinaire and dogmatic and far more flexible. Golda, already in the ninth year as foreign minister, was by now very well known and the attitude towards her was one of respect, admiration and much appreciation. True, Europe did not always respond positively to all her requests, and it took years before Israel would become an Associate Member of the European Common Market, but her contribution towards the attainment of that status was considerable.

Israel's efforts to seek some connection with NATO were started by Ben-Gurion in the early 1950's. The issue became more acute after the Sinai War. Ben-Gurion despatched Moshe Dayan and Shimon Peres to European capitals to see if that was feasible. Golda, too, was a party to these explorations that did not bear fruit. Only in 2016 was Israel permitted to open an office in NATO's headquarters in Brussels. It was obvious that the final approval for Israel's adherence to NATO in any way would have to come from Washington, and the United States was not yet ready to go that far. Many years later, Israel made its way slowly to NATO and was allowed to participate in military exercises. America's position regarding weapons somewhat softened in the late 1950's and it did not raise any problems over Israel's arms purchases in Europe. In a conversation Golda had with Dulles in October 1958, he was prepared to agree to the creation of a development fund worth ten million dollars through which Israel would finance the purchase of British-made "Centurion" tanks.

In August 1958, Golda traveled to Europe to solidify Israel's position in that continent. Her first stop was Paris. The French Fourth Republic had expired several weeks earlier and the Fifth Republic was about to be born, headed by President Charles de Gaulle.

A small number of Israelis knew De Gaulle, among them Ambassador Yaacov Tsur who had sense enough to maintain close ties with De Gaulle during the latter's long political exile. Few knew his views regarding the Middle East and there were growing fears in Israel lest there be a change for the worse in France's position regarding the Jewish state. France was still Israel's chief arms supplier. The French ambassador in Tel Aviv, Pierre Gilbert, insisted that Golda meet De Gaulle and the new Prime Minister Maurice Couve De Murville. On August 5, 1958, she was greeted by a guard of honor at the Elysee Palace and went up the stairs to meet the new French president. He greeted her very warmly. When she left his office, she stated in an interview that "the ties that unite our two countries are not the result of changing circumstances, but reflect unity of views".<sup>30</sup> In a later interview she declared that De Gaulle was a most impressive personality. From De Gaulle she went to see the former Prime Minister Guy Mollet and he explained to her that while De Gaulle had much sympathy towards Israel and had approved all her requests for arms, Israel must be aware that he did not want any formal arrangement or close public cooperation with Israel. Mollet thought this was the result of De Gaulle's fear that the Arabs might think there was a Franco-Israeli entente, even if it did not formally exist. Mollet also thought that De Gaulle would never make a deal with the Arabs at Israel's expense.<sup>31</sup> This proved to be a mistake. Several months later, as noted above, a change began to be discerned in the French attitude towards Israel when De Gaulle suspended the French involvement in the construction of the Dimona nuclear plant and recalled the French technicians. There was no publicity given to these changes in Israel, partly because Franco-Israel relations were already controversial in Israel. France was the "territory" of the Defense Ministry, meaning of Ben-Gurion and Peres, and in case the relations worsened, it would place these two in a negative light. A hint to the new winds blowing out of Paris was evident during Golda's meeting with Prime Minister Couve De Murville. She described him as chilly, cold, stuffy and "British".<sup>32</sup>

From Paris she flew to Rome for a meeting with Prime Minister Amintore Fanfani and his foreign minister August 9–10 and the next day she proceeded to London at the expressed request of Foreign Minister Selwin Lloyd. In retrospect,

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<sup>30</sup> Jean La-couture, *De Gaulle*, London, 1990–1991, p. 265.

<sup>31</sup> Bar-Zohar, *Ben-Gurion*, p. 1350.

<sup>32</sup> Meir, *My Life*, p. 228.

the visit to London was very important and led to a breakthrough in Anglo-Israel relations. Lloyd told her that the “Alpha” plan was dead and buried and that Britain wanted to turn a new page in its relations with Israel. It is not clear whether the British were convinced by Golda’s argument for the need to maintain a regional balance of power in the Middle East. It is more likely that the British understood that the Sinai War had created a totally new situation in the Middle East, Israel had now become a reality whose existence could no longer be challenged and there could be no imposition of an arrangement to which Israel objected. Since the British had huge experience in the Middle East and understood well the current events in the Arab world, they also understood the vast improvement in Israel’s strategic position and wondered, in view of this new reality, why they should not sell Israel weapons. After all, two years earlier they had joined forces with France and Israel in the Sinai-Suez war. Knowing the region, they were less concerned with adverse Arab reaction to the sale of British-made offensive weapons to Israel. In July 1958, after a bloody revolution in Iraq that toppled the monarchy in that country and an attempt to overthrow King Hussein in Jordan, Israel reluctantly agreed to allow British planes to overfly its territory carrying paratroopers to save King Hussein from utter collapse, while American troops landed in Beirut to rescue the Lebanese government. Britain understood that Israel was probably the only stable country in the region. Furthermore, the United States actually encouraged Britain to sell tanks and other weapons to Israel so that it would not have to do it self. Military relationship existed between Britain and Israel since the early 1950’s. Senior IDF officers studied in British military academies, Moshe Dayan and Yitzhak Rabin among them. The Israeli navy acquired ships and submarines from Britain and Israeli sailors trained in Royal Navy bases. Selwin Lloyd more or less hinted that Britain would be amenable to sell Israel the best tank in the market at the time, the “Centurion”. The talks in London yielded concrete results and a positive change was discerned in the British policy towards Israel.

Germany was the major issue on which Golda openly clashed with Ben-Gurion. He, Peres and the heads of the Defense Ministry came to recognize the rising economic, political and military power of Germany in Europe and that it was by now America’s major ally in that continent. Ben-Gurion and Peres quietly came to the conclusion that Israel could not rely solely on France, certainly not after General De Gaulle’s ascendance to power. Israel must now seek new sources for weapons in case it would have to deal with what Ben-Gurion aptly called “a rainy day”. Although Golda understood the need for the special relations with Germany, she could never overcome her revulsion of any dealings with Germany and continued to conspicuously avoid that country in her travels. But she did not object to the secret ties that were being established between the defense establishments of the two nations and only asked that she be fully informed of

their nature and content and that they remain secret. On certain occasions she did not support Ben-Gurion's German policy. At the end of 1957, he suggested that Moshe Dayan be sent to Germany to negotiate the purchase of submarines. She objected and Ben-Gurion backed down. The submarines were acquired in Britain. An Israeli decision to sell "Uzzy" submachine guns to the German army led to a cabinet crisis. The Achdut Ha'avodah party vociferously objected to the deal and this led Ben-Gurion to resign. The heads of this party were supported by Golda and also by the head of the Mossad and one of Golda's close allies, Isser Harel. But she did agree to Ben-Gurion meeting with Chancellor Adenauer in New York in March 1960, during which the German chancellor approved both the sale of weapons to Israel and a long-term development loan to Israel worth some half a billion dollars, an unheard-of sum at the time. Golda was torn. She understood that an isolated Israel must obtain weapons from any source, even from the devil himself as she often said, but Germany—that was too much for her. She was not happy that the Israeli social democratic party Mapai entered into an understanding with the right-wing Christian Democratic Union in Germany headed by Konrad Adenauer and Franz Josef Strauss, something that angered the heads of the Germany Social Democratic party then headed by Willy Brandt and Helmut Schmidt. She also realized that the time would soon arrive when Israel and Germany would establish diplomatic relations. In private conversations she expressed the hope that when this happened she would either no longer be foreign minister or absent from Israel on that day or ill. The negotiations leading to the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1965 were conducted by Eban as deputy prime minister. She did not want to be involved in this and when the Knesset voted to approve these ties she was indeed ill, but supported the move.

The German government displayed an enormous lack of sensitivity when it appointed Rolf Pauls as its first ambassador to Israel. He served as an officer in the Wehrmacht in World War II and lost his arm on the Russian front. Golda did not want to create a diplomatic incident at the start of the ties but spoke her mind in such a way that it reached Bonn. Germany insisted that it would name whoever it wanted as its ambassador in Israel. On the eve of presenting his credentials, Pauls was received by the foreign minister in accordance with protocol and presented to her a copy of his accreditation. She did not mince her words when she told him that in Israel there were several hundred thousand Holocaust survivors or those who lost families in the Holocaust. He tried to allay her concerns and told her he had just visited Yad Vashem and proposed that every German must visit this site. When the credentials presentation ceremony took place in the president's residence in Jerusalem, there was a minor demonstration outside the building. The national anthems were played by the Israel Police Band. Some of the musicians had numbers tattooed on their arms, scars from the death camps

they survived. Some played with tears streaming down their cheeks. Golda stood frozen next to President Shazar. She did not move a muscle when Pauls kissed her hand at the conclusion of the frosty ceremony. It was a very sad day for her, but she was forced to come to terms with the new reality. Over the years Germany became Israel's second most important ally (after the United States).

Not everywhere in Europe did Golda feel the burden of the past. She enjoyed very much traveling to Holland and the Scandinavian nations. Apart from some minor problems with United Nations observers from these countries, some of whom were Danes, Swedes, Norwegians and Finns, there were no major problems in Israel's standing there. She did not admire the commanders of the United Nations Truce Supervision Organization (UNTSO), headed during her term of office by the Danish General Vaagen Bennike, the Swedish General Karl Von Horn and the Norwegian General Odd Bull. On every occasion she reminded them that she thought the UN tended to adopt the Arab position and complained over the fact that most of the United Nations observers resided in East Jerusalem and in Damascus. For years she dealt with the UN when it came to border incidents along the Israel-Jordan and the Israel-Syria Armistice Lines. But these did not cloud Israel's relations with the Scandinavian countries. In both Denmark and Sweden, she could even thank their governments and people for the role they played in saving Danish Jews in 1943 and praise the Norwegian resistance to the Nazi occupation. For the same reasons she felt at home whenever she was in Holland.

Her attitude to the governments of the Eastern European nations was very reserved. During her brief service in Moscow she developed a sense of respect and awe of the military might of the Soviet Union and her willingness to use it if need be. The brutal suppression of the uprisings in Poland and Hungary in October-November 1956 was fresh in her memory as well as the Soviet threats to use force against the Jewish state. Israel found itself in a huge dilemma when it came to its attempts to seek Soviet support to help resolve the Arab-Israel conflict. The Russians were supplying huge amounts of weapons to the Arab nations, specifically Egypt and Syria and later Iraq and adamantly refused to discuss an arms freeze in the Middle East. Ben-Gurion understood from the early years of Israel that the resolution of the Arab-Israel conflict was very much dependent on Russian active or at least passive support. In his conversation with President Eisenhower in March 1960, he raised the possibility of involving the Russians in efforts to either resolve the conflict or at least end the arms race. The United States was appalled. Israel's ambassador to Washington Avraham Harman and Minister Ya'acov Herzog were summoned by the new Secretary of State Christian Herter (who succeeded Dulles after his death in 1959). Herter expressed amazement that Israel was even considering granting the Soviet Union an important role in the



Middle East. The United States sought to remove Soviet influence from the Middle East while Israel's prime minister thought that without the Soviets there would never be real peace between Israel and its Arab neighbors and suggested giving them a role in resolving the conflict.<sup>33</sup>

For its part, Israel sought to avoid any unnecessary tensions with the Soviet Union and barely spoke publicly of letting Soviet Jews immigrate to Israel. The policy was to use diplomatic channels and do nothing that would give the Kremlin an excuse to harm Soviet Jewry. The hostile Soviet policy was expressed in consistent anti-Israel voting in the United Nations, specifically in the Security Council, and of course selling the Arabs vast amounts of weapons. Since 1954, the Russians vetoed every resolution in the Security Council that could be construed as favorable to Israel. During Golda's term of office there was no attempt made by Israel to arrange for her to visit any Eastern European capital in spite of the existence, until June 1967, of diplomatic relations. Perhaps the Communist leaders in these countries feared a repetition of the outburst of emotions that erupted during Golda's visit to the Moscow synagogue in September 1948. The first Israeli foreign minister to visit Eastern Europe (but not the Soviet Union) was Abba Eban. However, Golda made sure that she appeared at social and diplomatic events in the Russian embassy in Tel Aviv. In 1964, there seemed to have been a beginning of thaw in Israel-Soviet cultural relations when an agreement was signed for cultural exchanges. It was one-sided, however. Israel did enjoy the visits of the cellist Mstislav Rostropovich and a number of leading Russian conductors who Golda hosted at her official residence in Jerusalem. A much-discussed visit of the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra to Russia was cancelled by the Soviets at the last minute. Golda had no illusions regarding Israel's ability to change the Soviet policy, but she used every opportunity to publicly express the hope that they will change their stand. Speaking in the Knesset on March 29, 1965, she stated that the supply of Soviet weapons to those who openly proclaimed their aim of destroying the Jewish state did not exactly tally with Russia's peaceful intents. But she was very careful in her statements regarding the Russians. The latter were often pragmatic when it came to their interests in Israel and especially in Jerusalem.<sup>34</sup> In October 1964, Israel signed an agreement with the Russians regarding the sale of land belonging to the Russian Orthodox Church. This was the first time that Israel signed any agreement with a major power dealing with Jerusalem. The Russians wanted the money and Israel the land. The place of the signing of the agreement,

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<sup>33</sup> Moshe Zak, *The Arab-Israel Conflict in the Pincers of the Great Powers*, Tel Aviv, 1986, p. 17.

<sup>34</sup> Address in the Knesset, 3 March 1965.

Jerusalem, did not overly bother them. They knew the Arabs would not protest and even if they had, Moscow would never have taken it seriously.

On the central issue of Israel's foreign policy—peace with the neighboring Arab states, not only had there been no progress, but there was growing deterioration and the seeds that eventually led to the Six Days War were sown. When it came to the region, the policy was dictated by Ben-Gurion although Golda did permit some of her senior aides to try various initiatives, but they all had to be coordinated with the Prime Minister's Office. One such initiative, known as the “policy of the periphery”, was the brainchild of Reuven Shiloah, the first head of the Mossad, later minister plenipotentiary in the Israel embassy in Washington, possessed of an imaginative, fertile and brilliant mind until his early death in 1959. This policy focused on the strengthening of close relations with the three key countries on the periphery of the region—Iran, Turkey and Ethiopia, all of whom bordered on Arab states. The rulers of these three nations saw Nasser as a dangerous and divisive element and came to the conclusion that it would be wise to coordinate some of their moves as well as intelligence-gathering with Israel. Israel maintained embassies in Ankara and in Addis-Ababa and an unofficial embassy in Tehran and saw these countries as possible bases for various moves in the region. From Iran Israel became actively involved in helping the Kurdish national movement fight against the Iraqi regime, from Ethiopia Israel could help the Christian rebels in South Sudan, and Turkey bordered Syria's northern provinces. In 1958, contact was established with Maronite Christian elements in Lebanon and Ben-Gurion was prepared to offer them arms for defense against the Moslems.

On her way to Paris in August 1958, Golda stopped off in Zurich for a secret meeting with Turkey's Foreign Minister Fatin Zorlu. It was decided that a high-level meeting between the leaders of both countries should take place, and it did, on August 29, 1958, when Ben-Gurion, Golda and some senior aides flew secretly to Ankara for a meeting with Prime Minister Adnan Menderez and Foreign Minister Zorlu. The formal part of the meeting dealt with strengthening cultural relations, but the substantive part dealt with laying the foundations for intelligence exchanges and possible political-military coordination in case of major upheavals in the region that would require urgent consultations.<sup>35</sup> These understandings were the basis for close ties that prevailed between Israel and Turkey until 2010 with the accession to power of Prime Minister and later President Erdogan.

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<sup>35</sup> When the matter of the trip to Turkey arose, Golda's name was not included. Only when it appeared that the Turkish charge with whom she had met in Paris would be there, she was included in the party. Bar-Zohar, Ben-Gurion, p. 1468.

The United States was informed of this new “alliance” and gave it its tacit blessing. It feared for the existence of the three moderate regimes in the Middle East. This became evident after the events of July 1958, when the Iraqi regime was overthrown and the regimes of King Hussein in Jordan and President Shamoun in Lebanon came under serious threat. This required the dispatch of American troops to Beirut and British troops to Amman to rescue these pro-Western governments. Israel was now seen as an island of stability that could be counted on in case of major emergency. Perhaps because of the constant turmoil in the Middle East instigated primarily by Nasser, a slight change could be discerned in the American policy towards Israel. The United States still feared what it called “erupting Israel”, a country that could one day erupt and attack its Arab neighbors. An IDF reserve call-up exercise in the spring of 1959 caused much concern in Washington. It was a mishap that led to the removal of the head of the IDF Military Intelligence General Harkabi and the reposting of the Chief of Operations General Zorea to the Northern Command, thereby clearing the way for Yitzhak Rabin to become chief of military operations and since 1964 IDF chief of staff. Officials in the Department of State were not convinced that something had gone wrong with a normal call-up exercise, but had to be satisfied with this explanation. Yet, the Americans consistently refused to discuss Ben-Gurion’s pleas for an Israel-American defense pact or any other arrangement and rejected any idea of inviting him for talks in the White House. The first official visit of an Israeli prime minister to Washington would have to wait until 1964.

On various other issues there existed a number of misunderstandings between Jerusalem and Washington. The American foreign policy documents of those years that were released for publication from 2000 testify to the many times in which Foreign Minister Meir summoned Ambassador Barbour to complain of America’s unfriendly positions regarding for example Jerusalem. The United States objected to Jerusalem being the capital of Israel, kept its embassy in Tel Aviv and pressured many nations to do the same. Golda also complained about American diplomats who raised doubts over Israel’s sovereignty over the entire Sea of Galilee, something that could challenge Israel’s right to pump water from that lake. On the eve of every United Nations General Assembly session there would be arguments over America’s vote on refugees and borders. For its part, the United States sharply criticized Israel for retaliation operations against Jordan starting in 1965, several months after the newly created Palestine Liberation Organization launched a number of attacks against Israel. The first operation carried out by the PLO was to lay explosives at the National Water Carrier pipeline in Galilee on January 1, 1965. The bomb did not go off, but this was a harbinger of things to come. The United States (and France) constantly asked that Israel refrain from any action against the fragile regime of King Hussein. The United States also

complained of several Israeli retaliation operations in Southern Lebanon, an area that would now become the main base of operations for the PLO.

Another issue that occupied much of Golda's time was the attempt to ship goods on board Israeli and other cargo ships through the Suez Canal. One of the main goals of the Sinai War had been to open that waterway for Israeli cargos. It was clear that while the United States supported Israel's claim to freedom of passage through the Straits of Tiran, it did nothing to press the Egyptians to allow Israeli goods through the Suez Canal, arguing that this was not a major issue, certainly not one that could worsen the already tense American-Egyptian relations. France also joined America in asking Israel not to make a test case so as not to put the maritime nations in a quandry. On March 26, 1957, Golda informed the Knesset Defense and Foreign Affairs Committee that Israel was considering sending a ships flying the Israeli flag through the Canal. The United Nations Secretary General Dag Hammarskjold also sought to see how Egypt would react to this possibility and was told by the Egyptian government that it was utterly out of question. The United States continued quietly to press Israel not to send a test ship but hinted at the idea of tacit understandings whereby Israeli goods would traverse the Canal on foreign ships. Israel agreed and on June 18, 1957, Golda informed that Knesset organ that the government of Israel was inclined to send cargo on foreign ships. Israel did not want to create a new and what many saw as an unnecessary crisis with the United States and the other maritime nations. Ideas of applying to the International Court of Justice in The Hague were also considered but rejected. There was no certainty that Israel would win its case. In July 1957, a Danish ship called "Inge Toft" carrying Israeli cargo passed the Canal with no incident. By February 1959, 14 foreign ships carrying Israeli goods had gone through the Canal and it seemed as though a quiet understanding was reached with the Egyptians.

But this tacit understanding foundered in February 1959. For various reasons Nasser decided to terminate this arrangement and several ships flying Liberian, German and Danish flags were stopped. The Danish ship "Inge Toft" that had successfully traversed the Canal in 1957 was stopped on May 21, 1959. Since its captain refused to have the Israeli goods unloaded, the ship was detained for several months. The subject was raised by Golda in her meeting with Hammskjold on October 7, 1959. He informed her that most United Nations member states were fed up with this issue and he would rather go back to the tacit understandings with the Egyptians.<sup>36</sup> He expressed the hope that he would be successful and Israel decided to give him a chance. The Israeli cabinet decided, in coordination

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<sup>36</sup> Urquhart, Hammarskjold, pp. 305–306.

with Hammarskjold, to once again test the Egyptians, and sent the Greek ship “Astipalea” from Haifa to Djibouti through the Canal bearing 400 tons of Israeli-made cement. Hammarskjold informed the Egyptian Foreign Minister Mahmud Fawzi that there would be no publicity given to this sailing. The ship was stopped in Port Said on December 17, 1959. Addressing the Knesset on December 22, 1959, Golda explained the evolution of events and argued that the Egyptian behavior derived from UN tolerance of the Nasserite policy of boycott and blockade and proclaimed that Israel was not prepared to fall prey to the policy of appeasing the Egyptians. The ship was released but its cargo was confiscated by the Egyptians as “property of the Palestinian nation”.<sup>37</sup> A week later, Golda met Hammarskjold during Independence Day celebrations in Cameroon and told him what she thought about him and the events. He was not overly impressed. Both were judges in a beauty queen contest in Yaounde, Cameroon’s capital. He refused to accept her undiplomatic behavior which he thought verged on emotions and hysterics. Her relations with Hammarskjold were now openly hostile.<sup>38</sup> She rejected what she considered his one-sided partial and biased attitude to Israel, his devout adherence to every letter in the Armistice Agreements and his attempts to appease the Arabs at Israel’s expense. But she did not go as far as did Ben-Gurion’s wife, Paula, who suggested to Hammarskjold that he should “get married and leave us alone”. When Hammarskjold was killed in a plane crash in Africa in September 1961, Golda was sorry but she did not “sit shivah”. As far as she was concerned, he represented the series of plots and schemes against Israel that characterized the unglorified final political stages of the Sinai War. “Inge Toft” was not released until February 1960.

In the mid 1960’s, the head of the Mossad Meir Amit established contact with some Egyptian intelligence officers and proposed the dispatch of another Israeli ship through the Canal to test once again Egypt’s intentions. They rejected the idea and argued that Egypt considered itself in a state of war with Israel. Egypt also wanted to link any progress on Israeli-Egyptian relations with the resolution of the Palestinian problem in all its aspects. For its part, Israel was careful not to use the issue as a cause to go to war because it was fully aware that in this issue there would be no international support as most powers considered this problem minute and marginal. For Golda, deeply involved in this issue, this was another proof of the international bias and prejudice against Israel, of a double standard and the creation of the impression that Israel was a pariah state and as

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<sup>37</sup> Statement in the Knesset, 22 December 1959, see also Eitan Barak, “The Forgotten Struggle, Egypt and the Freedom of Navigation in the Suez Canal 1957–1967”, in *Studies in Israel History*, 11 (2001), pp. 80–131.

<sup>38</sup> Urquhart, Hammarskjold, pp. 307–339.

such rightly deserved this treatment. She preferred to maintain the arrangement reached over the Straits of Tiran and warned anyone who wanted to hear that the closure of Tiran would mean war. When Nasser reblockaded the Straits on May 23, 1967, this was the final factor that led Eshkol to realize that this was a warlike act and that Israel now had the right to undertake defensive measures.

The key arena—the United Nations, also proved to be very hostile. Golda's first contact with the international body was in March 1948 when she participated, as a member of the Jewish Agency delegation, in discussions instigated by the American request to delay the implementation of the 1947 partition resolution and seek a long-term United Nations trusteeship regime for Palestine. Her attitude towards this body, and primarily to Dag Hammarskjöld, its Secretary General from 1953 to 1961, was one of open suspicion and total lack of any confidence and trust.<sup>39</sup> It was obvious to her that Israel would never get a fair hearing in the United Nations and would always be the target of Arab diplomatic onslaught who from 1954 were joined by the Soviet Union and its Eastern European satellites. Many of her expressions concerning the United Nations revealed her sense of impotence when it came to this body. This was one of the subjects on which she differed from Moshe Sharett. He always reminded anyone who cared to listen that the United Nations was Israel's midwife and deserved some respect. Her experience in the post-Sinai War diplomacy convinced her of the American betrayal which she preferred to think was the result of the instigation and encouragement of Hammarskjöld. But while she did not ascribe much importance to the UN, she insisted on heading the Israeli delegation to every session of the General Assembly during her decade as foreign minister. She rightly estimated that she could use her presence in New York to meet foreign ministers of nations that were friendly and even those who had no ties with Israel. She would seek to proclaim Israel's policies to the very important American public opinion either through her address to the General Assembly or by her contacts with the media. She made sure that on every occasion she would meet with the key journalists who shaped American public opinion, the arena to which she ascribed much importance. This annual trip to the UN naturally required meetings with Hammarskjöld that were always conducted in a frosty atmosphere. He argued on the basis of international law and the need for the UN to be an honest broker. She rejected his interpretation of the term "honest" and openly charged him with being pro-Arab. He complained of border incidents and tensions between the IDF and the United Nations observers, of Israeli works in demilitarized zones, and mainly argued that Israel

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<sup>39</sup> Golda consistently supported the candidacy of U Thant for the post of Secretary General of the UN, the other candidate was Mongy Slim of Tunisia, see U Thant, *View from the UN—Memoirs*, New York, 1978, pp. 11–13.

was consistently violating the 1949 Armistice Agreements. Her attempts to change his view failed. His biographers confirmed his hostile attitude to Israel in general and to Golda Meir in particular. She was the one who accused him in every conversation of being pro-Arab and he may have felt that she thought he was at heart anti-Semitic. She did find more of a common language with his successor, the Burmese U Thant who was known to some Israelis from their service in Burma in the mid 1950's. From the late 1950's, the UN was the arena where she met the leaders of the emerging Third World nations. She tried to guide them there and be of some help. She also sought to use them. In 1959, she urged the UN ambassador of the Ivory Coast, Arsene Usher, to promote a resolution condemning the Arab states for their role in the slave trade in Africa. The resolution failed to win votes, but as a reward Usher was given a trip to Israel and medical treatment at the Hadassah Medical Center in Jerusalem. Golda's speeches in the Assembly were not especially inspiring since they were written by others, until 1959 mainly by Eban. At the end of the speech, she usually deviated from the written text and spoke directly to the Arab leaders. That won her some headlines in the next day's American newspapers. The Arabs did not react. Most of them walked out when she spoke at the UN.

Another reason for her extended stay in New York, ostensibly to attend the General Assembly, was more prosaic. It gave her a legitimate opportunity to stay away from Israel for several weeks, far from the boiling cauldrons of domestic Israeli politics, from the constant bickering with Shimon Peres, from the need to read daily the Israeli media that was becoming more inquisitive and critical of the government and its leaders. In New York she was the center of attention, and since the Assembly did not require much of her time, she was available for appearances on behalf of the United Jewish Appeal, Israel Bonds and other Jewish bodies. American Jews had become great admirers and lavished much affection and love on her. She also had time to attend concerts, the theater, and above all to see old friends. Until she retired from the Israel Foreign Service in 1959, her childhood friend Regina Hamburger served as the Secretary of the Israel Delegation to the United Nations, and that gave them much time to be together. Marie Syrkin and her sister Clara were also on hand. Her prolonged absence in New York did not affect the daily routine in the Foreign Ministry, since she trusted and relied heavily on the director general of the time, usually hand-picked by her. In 1959, she appointed Walter Eytan ambassador to France and replaced him temporarily by Ya'acov Tsur and from 1960 to 1965 by Chaim Yachil and since 1965 by Aryeh Levavi. Her contact men with Jerusalem were the head of her bureau Simcha Dinitz and other officials. She was careful to invite Knesset members to serve on the Israel United Nations Delegation so that they would realize the many problems she and the Foreign Ministry faced in New York.

Among the many other subjects with which she dealt a central subject was always on her mind—immigration to Israel. The main sources for Jewish immigration at the end of the 1950's and early 1960's were the countries of North Africa. Apart from Jews managing to leave Poland and Hungary after their abortive uprisings in the fall of 1956, only one communist nation permitted Jews to emigrate, provided there would be no publicity. It was Romania under the Nicolae Ceaucescu regime which for massive payments in dollars enabled Romanian Jews to leave. Other nations in Eastern Europe were closed. However, the hope that one day the gates of the Soviet Union would open never diminished and much effort was undertaken to maintain contact with the Jews there. Golda had been deeply involved with Russian immigration since her days in Moscow in 1948. The efforts were the responsibility of an organ called "Lishkat Hakesher" (the Liaison Bureau) and later renamed "Nativ" (the Pathway) was established in the early 1950's and headed for many years by Shaul Avigur and after him by Nehemiah Levanon. Formally, this body operated as part of the Prime Minister's Office, and its main role was to maintain contacts with Soviet Jews through the dissemination of written material on Jews, Judaism, Hebrew and Israel using non-Israeli Jewish tourists who traveled to Russia and agreed to carry such materials on their body and hand it over to contact people. They carried Hebrew text books, bibles and newspapers from Israel. Contact was also maintained through the overseas broadcasts on Israel radio called The Voice of Zion to the Diaspora. This activity inevitably involved the Jewish Agency. Soon it was clear that Jewish communities in the free world would have to be mobilized to draw the attention of their governments about this grave problem. But there was a major policy issue involved. A number of Jewish leaders in the Diaspora headed by Dr. Nahum Goldmann, concurrently the Chairman of the Jewish Agency Executive, the president World Zionist Organization and the president of the World Jewish Congress, advocated quiet diplomacy. He claimed that through his covert contacts with Soviet leaders he would be able to convince them to allow Jewish immigration and cautioned against demonstrative acts that could only embarrass the Soviet leaders and hurt the quiet diplomacy he attempted with no success at all. Golda thought that much more should be done to arouse favorable public opinion mainly in Western countries. She supported the expansion of the activities of Nativ to include the establishment of branch offices in several European capitals as well as Washington to mobilize world Jewry and create public opinion and work in the political arena of these countries. The infrastructure that was built when she was foreign minister finally bore fruit at the end of the 1960's when the Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev allowed a growing number of Jews to immigrate to Israel. This happened when she was prime minister. The struggle was crowned with success in 1989 when



the Soviet regime under Michail Gorbachov opened the gates to unlimited emigration and over a million and a half Russian Jews were allowed to leave, the majority of them going to Israel.

Golda Meir was also very actively involved in the immigration of North African Jews. Since the mid-1950's, when it became obvious that France was going to grant autonomy and later independence to Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia, there was growing concern about the over the fate of four hundred thousand Jews in the Maghreb. How would they fare? Would they be allowed to leave after independence? Israel established secret contacts with the royal dynasty of Morocco and secret arrangements entered into in the late 1950's resulted in the immigration of thousands of Jews who arrived in Israel via France. But when Morocco received its independence its leaders feared that a mass departure of the Jews would severely harm that country's economy and the gates were closed. Israel resorted to smuggling Jews from that country using Mossad agents operating in the framework of an organization aptly called "Hamisgeret" (the Framework). Here Israel showed how its intelligence service became involved in rescuing Jews from countries of distress instead of sticking solely to its role of intelligence gathering. Here, too, differences of opinion existed between the Israelis and Goldmann. He once again thought that quiet diplomacy through the World Jewish Congress would do the trick. The Israeli agents felt the ground was burning under the Jews and they had to be evacuated at once. New material emerged from documents issued in the early 2000's as well as books on this effort showed that a series of understandings and tacit agreements with the Moroccan Royal House, initially under King Mohammed V and later his son, King Hassan II, led to the emigration of over 100,000 Jews in an operation code named "Yachin". In 1948, there were close to 250,000 Jews in Morocco. By 2016, less than four thousand remained in that country.

In 1961, it was evident that France was on the eve of granting independence to Algeria (an agreement to that effect was signed in Evian in early 1962). Israel feared for the fate of the over 100,000 Jews in that country who were French citizens. In a conversation with the French Foreign Minister Couve de Murville on June 8, 1961, she asked his permission to approve of the presence of Jewish Agency emissaries in Algeria. He said that the matter was highly sensitive and he had already discussed it with Nahum Goldmann. He also stated that no one prevented the Jews from leaving Algeria and moving to Israel. Golda said that there was already some agitation on the part of the Arab states that called on Algeria not to allow Jewish immigration to Israel. The end result was different and from Israel's standpoint insulting. The majority of French Jews left Algeria in the first months after it gained independence and headed to France. Being French nationals, they were eligible for various benefits given to former French settlers in

Algeria. Israel was the third choice. The second was Canada, specifically Quebec that was prepared to receive French-speaking emigrants. The French Jewish community now doubled in strength. Some of the North African Jews became prominent in politics, economics, culture, theater, cinema, academia, the media and science. Under American pressure, Tunisia's president Habib Bourguiba allowed Jews to leave Tunisia, provided they did so through a third country and as long as there would be no publicity. Many ended up in France.

When it came to immigration, there arose a major problem. It was easy to stress the need for immigration from countries of distress such as the Soviet Union and North Africa, but when it came to Western countries such as the United States, Canada and Britain, calling upon their Jewish communities to immigrate to Israel could hurt fundraising for that country. The heads of major Jewish fundraising organizations were still laboring under the impression that Israel was a poor nation and that American, Canadian and British Jews were called upon to provide money but not fulfill the Zionist ideal, namely immigrate to Israel. Although Golda was a classical example of immigration from America, she did not make much of it in her public appearances for the United Jewish Appeal and the Israel Bonds campaigns. In fact, the first Israeli prime minister who openly called on Jews to immigrate to Israel was Ariel Sharon who did so during a visit to France in 2003 and angered both the French Jewish community and the French government. One of his successors, Benjamin Netanyahu, did the same following a violent wave of anti-Semitic acts in France in 2014 and 2015, and was also rebuked by the French president and prime minister. It was much easier for Golda to talk about helping the poor Jews from African and Arab countries than calling for Aliyah from the wealthier Western nations. She may have also realized that as long as the Orthodox Rabbinate in Israel proscribed Reform and Conservative presence in Israel, did not recognize their rabbis, hence their conversions as well, it was useless to raise the issue, because she too did not want to rock the boat in Israel and challenge the hold of the Rabbinate over personal statutes such as marriage, divorce, burial and above all conversions. This did not detract from her mastery of fundraising and she became one of the best fundraisers for Israel. Her simple language and direct appeal to the heart of the people brought her tens of thousands new admirers in the Diaspora.

In spite of the enormous stress and pressure and a very tight schedule, both in Israel and overseas, the constant smoking of some two packs of cigarettes a day and endless cups of coffee, Golda managed to maintain her relatively good health. True, in October 1957 a deranged Israeli hurled a hand grenade at the government table in the Knesset. She was sitting next to Ben-Gurion at the cabinet table in the Knesset. He required long hospitalization while she got away with several days in the hospital. Towards the mid 1960's, signs of an illness were

detected. At the end of 1965, her doctors at the Beilinson Medical Center diagnosed cancer of the lymphatic nodes. One of the things she did after hearing that was to write a will that she never changed. This revelation played an important role in her decision to retire from the cabinet (although not from the Knesset). She also suffered from phlebitis in her right leg, the result of the accident she had had in Brooklyn in the summer of 1948. She was adamant when it came to publicizing her state of health. She insisted this was a private and personal matter and not a public one. The first time she would publicly confirm an illness was in December 1973 when she authorized her spokesman to issue a statement saying that she had herpes zoster. Whenever news reports appeared in the Israeli media concerning her health, and some of these stories spoke of serious deterioration in her situation, she accused Shimon Peres and his cohorts of spreading these rumors. She managed to remain well also by spending her weekends with her family either in her home in the north Tel Aviv suburb of Ramat Aviv where she bought an apartment next to her son Menachem, his wife Aya and their children, or in kibbutz Revivim where her daughter Sarah lived since its inception in the mid-1940's. The family made sure that she got plenty of rest and above all peace of mind. At home she could share her inner thoughts with no fear of leaks to the media. The members of Revivim also respected her privacy and gave her the use of an apartment.

In the decade of her tenure as foreign minister, her views regarding peace had not changed at all. On the contrary, they became even firmer. Peace, she repeatedly stated, would come only after the Arab states had drawn the conclusion that they would never be able to annihilate Israel. For her the Palestinian refugee problem, borders, water and navigation were not the core issues but merely symptoms of the Arab refusal to come to terms with the existence of a free, sovereign and Jewish Israel. Between 1956 and 1965, she used to say that she had never met a Western leader who could assure her that the Arabs would be prepared to sign peace treaties with Israel and enter into normal relations with the Jewish state even if Israel made territorial concessions and took back a significant number of refugees. The Arabs were adamant all or nothing. In the final analysis, she was convinced that only Israel would determine her fate and decide what constituted her vital interests. The Arab specialists in the Foreign Ministry understood her views, but suggested that some finessing of Israel's attitude was called for. But she was adamant and stern, on the core issues there was no room for experimentation. Many memorandums written by Ezra Danin and Reuven Shiloah attest that she did not always attach much weight to some of their ideas to break the deadlock. Some of Shiloah's proposals to reorganize the Foreign Ministry were rejected by the senior officials who feared for their standing. Golda, never the one to head

organizational revolutions, did not insist, although she may have thought that some of their ideas were worthy of trying.<sup>40</sup>

An interesting opportunity arose when the Tunisian president, Habib Bourguiba, visited a Palestinian refugee camp near Jericho in early 1965. On March 6, 1965, he called for reconciliation between Israel and the Arab world including the Palestinians if Israel agreed to return to the 1947 partition lines and accept Palestinian refugees as demanded in General Assembly Resolution 194. He of course meant they should be allowed to return to Jaffa, Haifa, Acre and Nazareth. Golda's reaction was that the speech contained some interesting points but there were many moot points as well. She could have challenged him to act as a mediator. While she admitted that it was nice to hear an Arab voice that did not call for the extermination of Israel, she did not pursue the issue and waited to see what would be the Arab reaction. As expected, it was violently anti-Bourguiba.<sup>41</sup>

From a hesitant start in 1956, she slowly became the dominant voice in Israel's foreign policy making. Part of the reason was the slow decline of Ben-Gurion. Another had to do with the resolution of some of the many conflicts with Shimon Peres and the Defense Ministry over jurisdiction, the third and most important was her growing confidence that she could handle the job with no major difficulties. She began to like the job, although she still had many reservations about some of her senior officials and thought that some of them were more interested in their careers and promotions and not necessarily on Israel's struggle to integrate itself more deeply into the family of nations. However, when she retired from the ministry, Israel's international position was far better than the one she had inherited ten years earlier. The Sinai War was the cause for much of the transformation, but also the constant effort to explain Israel's position, to enter into every nook and cranny possible and utilize newly-created situations as well as adopting many unorthodox policies and laying less emphasis on the classical forms of the arts and crafts of diplomacy. Of all of Israel's foreign ministers, she served the longest, and yet she left no impact on the structure of the ministry, the workers' morale and the adoption of revolutionary approaches in foreign policy. This would not change even fifty years after she retired, and the

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**40** See Eshed, Mossad; Danin, Zionist. Danin claimed there was no systematic thinking, clear-cut direction and consistent action in the area of Arab affairs. He claimed that there was no policy regarding the Arab world. Both he and Shiloah complained of strained relations in the ministry. Danin called them a jungle of human relations. See Danin, *op.cit.*, p. 269.

**41** For the Bourguiba Affair see Michael Lasker, "Between Bourguism and Nasserism: Israel-Tunisia Relations and the Arab-Israel Conflict in the 1950s and 1960s", in *Studies in Israel History*, 11 (2001), pp. 46–79.

Foreign Ministry continues to be a secondary ministry with disgruntled staff and very little influence on the making of foreign policy. She herself contributed to some of this during her tenure as prime minister when she bypassed the ministry. She will be remembered more as one of Ben-Gurion's loyal associates. In retrospect, the ten years in the Foreign Ministry were possibly the best preparation for what would be her last and supreme position, that of prime minister. But until she would be called to assume this office three-and-a-half years later, Israel and the Mapai party would be subjected to enormous stress and much turmoil from which both did not really recover, and which would directly lead to the loss of the Labor Movement hegemony in the May 1977 elections that brought their arch rival Menachem Begin to power.

## 14 Ben-Gurion Must Go (1956–1966)

Israel's dramatic victory in the Sinai War catapulted new and fresh forces into the political arena. Some of them blossomed in the Ministry of Defense, some in the IDF, several of them even in the Foreign Service. Some rose in the Mapai hierarchy. All were closely connected to their patron—David Ben-Gurion. They venerated him and placed their political future in his hands. For his part, he prepared them to assume higher positions. Some of them, men like Moshe Dayan, Shimon Peres, Abba Eban, Ehud Avriel, Teddy Kollek and Yitzhak Navon, were in their late 40's or early 50's and had no intention of waiting patiently until there would be room for them in the national and party leadership. The veteran leaders, especially Golda Meir, Zalman Aranne, Levi Eshkol, Pinchas Sapir, Pinchas Lavon and Israel Yesha'ayahu had no intention of vacating their places for the younger rising stars. They were in their late 50's and early 60's, in good health and spirit and controlled the government, the Jewish Agency, Mapai and the Histadrut apparatus. They were united in the feeling that Ben-Gurion had no right, moral, let alone political, to leapfrog over an entire generation and hand over the country's leadership to ambitious youngsters who they thought lacked a deep ideological commitment to the principles and values of the labor movement and at times even made fun of them. They rose only because they existed under the huge umbrella of the founding father. The older leadership was convinced that the younger leaders symbolized Israel's new ethos—the so-called “bitsuism” that meant performance and not ideology. True, some of the older leaders were not intellectual giants, but at least, it was argued, they rose through the hierarchy in the natural way, went through a long period of apprenticeship and survived to reach their present positions. Many of the older generation of leaders were deeply involved in the great drama of the struggle for statehood and served Ben-Gurion in loyalty and submission in the early years of Israel. They failed to see why they should be asked to yield their rightful place in the hierarchy only because Ben-Gurion was possessed of some new ideas how Israel should be governed, led, and behave.

While he was still in Sede Boker, Ben-Gurion carefully mulled over his plans how Israel's political structure should be reformed, mainly by changing the electoral system. He hoped that by instituting the district voting system, the state would finally achieve a stable government in which the ruling party would have no need to share power in a coalition with the smaller, mostly religious parties that blackmailed the large ones. He thought that the new system would lessen the links between the candidates for the Knesset and the party central committee and they would be less beholden to a nominating committee. Above all, this would ensure that the political parties would not make huge demands for jobs, budgets and influence. This system, feared Mapai's second generation leaders, would

reduce their control of the party which was based on their control of the national, Histadrut, Jewish Agency and party mechanisms. They realized that Ben-Gurion was out to destroy once and for all this vicious cycle.

In 1954 and early 1955, many hints began to originate from Sede Boker of Ben-Gurion's intentions to change the rules of the political game in Israel. The veterans closed ranks to defeat these ideas and to block the rise of the younger generation of leaders. In this manner they would preserve their political power and they would determine, when the time came, who would succeed Ben-Gurion. Among the veterans, Golda played a central role and soon stood out in the struggle that erupted in the late 1950's. She had not forgotten Ben-Gurion's insulting remarks in Givat Haim in January 1957. He tried to appease her by sending an extremely warm letter about her when the American Jewish Congress awarded her the prestigious Stephen Wise Award. On July 25, 1957, he wrote:

The Jewish people is rich with great personalities, perhaps more than other people, but similar to other nations, does not lack great women. Perhaps we are the only people who remember not only the fathers of the nation but also its mothers Sarah, Rebecca and Rachel are no less in their standing than Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and as we were fortunate to be led by a great woman in the era of the Judges, we are also fortunate that we have at the start of the Third Temple a woman of a noble soul, of many deeds and blessed with talent and sense to stand in the front row of our free nations representatives, in Golda's image—as we are used to calling her out of love and esteem. Golda's moral and spiritual greatness was evident when she was a young pioneer in the Valley, the force of her leadership was seen later in the workers movement, and when Israel was created, she was called upon to represent Israel in a major power, and after her outstanding achievements as Minister of Labor she was entrusted with administering Israel's foreign policy. Her service was marked by dignity and splendor for the entire nation and for Jewish women and we could not find a more deserving person than Golda for being honored by American Jewry, this is the greatest gift bestowed on us by American Jewry.<sup>1</sup>

These laudatory words did little to allay her fears. Even Ben-Gurion's overt attempts to involve her in key decisions in Israel's foreign relations, such as the Policy of the Periphery, the nuclear issue and mainly the strengthening of ties with the United States, were seen by her as partial attempts to pacify her and her feeling of being affronted did not evaporate. Her sense of animosity towards the young leaders that surrounded the aging Ben-Gurion grew. She was convinced that they utilized his declining years to advance their own political careers. She may have hoped that one day he would wake up and see that he was being used by them and then he would reject them and go back to the loyal and trusted veteran leaders. But soon she realized that at stake was not a group of young,

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<sup>1</sup> Letter from Ben-Gurion to Israel Goldstein, 25 July 1957, in Ben-Gurion Archive.

impatient, energetic leaders using Ben-Gurion's naïvete for their needs, but a well-thought-out policy by the leader who was using them to promote his central goal of the time—changing Israel's political system and above all the electoral system.

Mapai's younger leaders began to advance even before the Sinai war. Three were elected to the Knesset in the 1955 elections, but soon resigned, arguing that Knesset service was dull and boring. They sought a more exciting arena in which to excel. Since the Knesset did not fit their ambitions and they had no intention of wasting their time in the grey task of legislation, some moved to the Foreign Ministry and became ambassadors. One of them was Shlomo Hillel.

In 1953, Ben-Gurion promoted another young and promising man, Giora Yoseftal, to the post of the party's secretary general, thus signaling that senior jobs, hitherto reserved for the veterans, were now open to the youngsters. In 1958, Moshe Dayan retired from the IDF and in a number of public meetings lashed out at the Mapai leadership, its institutions and methods, and demanded reforms. This led some veteran leaders to fear that Dayan could engineer a military takeover to establish a military dictatorship in Israel. They shared this fear with Ben-Gurion, but he claimed that they were exaggerating and continued to support Dayan, whom he saw not only as a war hero but prototype of a Sabra, free of the Diaspora mentality and complexes, who said what he thought and above all possessed exceptional leadership qualities.

However, unknown to the older generation, Ben-Gurion decided to pass his mantle to someone else—Yigael Yadin, the IDF's second chief of staff and well-known archaeologist. Yadin, he hoped, who had leadership qualities as well as a rich military background as chief of operations and the acting chief of staff during the War of Independence, and then as the IDF's second chief of staff who built the modern IDF. Yadin, the scion of a well-known Jerusalem family and a leading academic, was not tainted by being a party politician sullied by petty politics. He was above politics. Ben-Gurion may have seen him as an Israeli De Gaulle, waiting behind the scenes to be called upon to lead the nation, a sort of Joshua after Moses. Yadin's current achievements were mainly in archaeology and his digs in Massada and Hatzor won him international reputation, as did his many books and articles.

The veterans were appalled. How could Ben-Gurion even conceive of such an idea? Yadin lacked any party background and had no political experience. His candidacy hurt them personally, as they felt they were being repudiated as being unfit to inherit the Ben-Gurion mantle. They could argue that at least Dayan, Peres and some of the other younger leaders were party members, participated in the party's institutions, and rose at least outwardly through the ranks, even if their promotion was very rapid. But Yadin was a total stranger to politics. To their delight, Yadin steadfastly refused to be wooed by Ben-Gurion and after he failed



to create a popular movement to bring about a change in the political system, Yadin went back to archaeology and remained there until 1976. In that year he created a new party called the Democratic Movement for Change, and served as deputy prime minister in Begin's cabinet for five years. His political achievements showed how right the veteran leaders were: He left no visible legacy behind. Ben-Gurion had chosen the wrong man.

Once again, as if to appease the angry goddess, Ben-Gurion sent a very warm letter to Golda on her 60<sup>th</sup> birthday that was held on May 3, 1958:

Dear and beloved Golda. I heard the secret that you reached the age of sixty...your birthday is a good excuse to express some sentiments of esteem and friendship to a loyal pioneer, a proud Jewess who arouses Jewish pride, a courageous and intelligent fighter, a diligent builder, a shining example and a role model, a true friend, pedantic and forgiving at the same time.<sup>2</sup>

She liked the compliments but did not ignore the new political reality that became evident when even before the 1959 Knesset elections, Ben-Gurion revealed his intention to appoint Moshe Dayan, Yigael Yadin and Abba Eban as ministers in his new cabinet. She told him simply that after the elections she had no intention of remaining in the cabinet. In order to prevent Ben-Gurion from implementing his aims, she asked for and received the support of some of the veteran leaders. Among this group was Pinchas Lavon who became the secretary general of the Histadrut, replacing Mordechai Namir who replaced Golda as minister of labor in 1956. Lavon had huge accounts to settle with Dayan and Peres from his short stint as defense minister. He preferred to ignore the role of Golda, Aranne and Eshkol in his removal from the Defense Ministry in February 1955.

In an attempt to pacify the growing gap between the younger and older leadership, several meetings were held in November and December 1958 in a party facility known as Kfar Hayarok. Among the participants were several younger leaders already known as the "Young Turks". They included Dayan, Peres, Shlomo Hillel, Aharon Remez, Asher Yadlin and Meir Bareli. They faced Golda Meir, Zalman Aranne and Levi Eshkol. Ben-Gurion played the role of the arbiter. The veterans lashed out at the youngsters. They reminded them that when they arrived in Israel in 1920's, they subordinated themselves to the authority of the Second Aliyah leaders with no qualms. They used the opportunity to tell the young leaders that they had no intention of giving up their present or future standing and positions. The younger leaders would have to prove their merit before they could make demands for positions and promotions. The veterans

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<sup>2</sup> Letter from Ben-Gurion to Golda Meir, 3 May 1958, in Ben-Gurion Archive.

accused the younger leaders of pursuing power for the sake of power and told them that they did not really represent the next generation of Mapai. Above all, they said, each person had the right to win a position according to his talents and capabilities, but as a group, they would enjoy no special privileges. Golda was at her sarcastic best when she told them:

What can I do since I cannot forget that all my life I learned that one of the youth's privileges is to rebel against the nonimplementation of ideas. I never heard that serious youths, and our youth is serious, will do things that we never dreamed will be done in our generation—they will boast of having no ideology.<sup>3</sup>

But these words of reproof did not have much impact on the younger generation. Two weeks later, Dayan resumed his attack on the old leaders. In a public meeting in Jerusalem on December 27, 1957, he asked: “Why does Israeli youth, that in the past fifteen years crawled in the rocks with a rifle in hand, fought against airplanes and destroyers in the War of Independence and the Sinai War, understand less the problems of the Jewish people than those who sat for the past twenty-five years on the fifth floor of the Histadrut Executive Committee building?”<sup>4</sup> This remark infuriated the veterans and even angered Ben-Gurion who noted that this time Dayan had gone too far. At the end of 1958, Israel Yesha’ayahu summed up the situation using biblical style when he asked Ben-Gurion: “The question is that of the striped shirt. All those present here are your sons and you have chosen your Joseph, anointed him with the shirt and roused the envy of those whom you left with no shirt”.<sup>5</sup>

As expected, the discussions were inconclusive since it became apparent that there could be no bridging the gaps that were already there. By early 1959, it was thought that for the time being and in order to properly prepare for the 1959 Knesset elections, there should be a truce. Ben-Gurion succeeded in placing the names of Eban, Dayan, Peres and Yoseftal in safe Knesset seats. To counter them, Achdut Ha’avodah decided to field in its Knesset list some well-known names, those of Yigal Allon, Moshe Carmel and Yitzhak Ben-Aharon, next to Yisrael Galili and other veterans. They would very soon become the counterweight to the Mapai younger leaders.

The 1959 election campaign was probably the easiest ever experienced by Mapai. The key slogan was that Mapai was responsible for everything good that ever happened in Israel—the establishment of the state, the impressive victories

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<sup>3</sup> Protocol of the Mapai Secretariat, 6 December 1958.

<sup>4</sup> Bar-Zohar, Ben-Gurion, pp. 1438–1440.

<sup>5</sup> Mapai Secretariat, 6 December 1958.

in the War of Independence and Sinai. It was headed by the most outstanding leaders of this generation. Mapai, it was argued, had brought Israel to its present state: quiet along the borders, huge development in all fields of endeavour, the beginning of an economic boom. Mapai used the slogan adopted by the British Conservative Party that also ran in 1959— “You never had it so good”. Perhaps this motto was not that original because slowly Mapai came to look like Israel’s conservative party. Its revolutionary zeal had long disappeared and it was seen as the party of the establishment. True, Mapai’s leaders had much to be proud of: Israel entered into an era of economic prosperity, immigration grew and emigration dwindled, its international standing and relations with the outside world improved considerably, its ties with America healed. It looked as though Israel faced a very bright future. Albeit, peace was far away, but the fear of war has abated for the time being. Few were surprised when Mapai won a resounding victory in the November 3, 1959, elections. It gained 47 seats, the largest number of seats it ever won. Mapam won 9 seats, Achdut Ha’avodah 7, Herut retained its strength with 17 seats, the General Zionists gained 8 seats and the religious parties 18.

In spite of her decision not to join the next cabinet, Golda played a very active role in the campaign, appearing in an endless number of public meetings. She was one of the most sought-after personalities among the party functionaries. A few felt that her heart was not always in the campaign and at times she appeared to be somewhat apathetic. But as always, for her the party was above all and its will never to be questioned, always to be obeyed. She would not be the one to harm the chances of winning the elections and continuing to rule Israel, even if Ben-Gurion’s intentions were not looked upon favorably by herself and her friends and political allies. But if anyone had any illusion that the victory would renew the golden era of Mapai and rejuvenate Ben-Gurion’s charismatic leadership, it was not to be. The rift was too deep to be papered over: the younger generation vs. the older one, the center vs. the periphery, Lavon vs. Dayan and Peres, Sharett vs. Ben-Gurion, Golda, Aranne and Sapir vs. Ben-Gurion and his cohorts, Mapai was torn from within and the tragedy was that being the dominant political party in Israel, this reflected on the entire political structure of Israel. From that time, Mapai began to be seen as a “supermarket” party, in which it was possible to choose from a variety of leaders, positions and views.

When Ben-Gurion began to put together his next cabinet, he realized the need to include every section and pacify all the groups that made up Mapai. Shimon Peres was appointed deputy defense minister, who would oversee the daily running of that ministry from now on and would have parliamentary responsibility for that most important government department. Dayan was appointed at his own request as minister of agriculture; Giora Yoseftal took over the Ministry of

Labor and Housing. There remained the problem of what to do with Abba Eban. When Golda told Ben-Gurion in November 1958 that she would not remain in the cabinet, he hinted to Eban that he would succeed her by right because of his stellar service as Israel's ambassador to both the United States and the United Nations when he became known as the Voice of Israel. Yet, being a political animal, Ben-Gurion was now convinced that in view of the power relationship in the party, he could not dispense with Golda's service and presence. If she went, it was likely that she could be followed by Eshkol, Aranne, and Sapir that could cause an inevitable split in the party. He specifically said to her that she was one of the four dominant personalities in Israel and her absence from the cabinet table could never be explained to the party and nation. Ben-Gurion became convinced that she was in fact the most dominant figure after him, although for the sake of being polite he included two others in that category. He knew well how big was her influence on Aranne, the veteran leaders' ideologist, on Eshkol and Sapir. These two, by dint of their positions, finance minister and minister of commerce and industry, ruled over the party machine and its budget and a vast section of the economy. They were the ones who obtained the necessary funding to cover the campaign expenses of Mapai. Ben-Gurion rightly assessed that this time he could not yet challenge them with his untried and somewhat politically raw younger leaders.

In the course of November 1959, he held a number of softening-up conversations with Golda to ensure that she remain in the cabinet. She once again erupted, citing her pet peeve: Peres's constant undermining of the authority and work of the Foreign Ministry. She claimed that this was proof that Ben-Gurion did not trust her judgment and capabilities and saw in this a major assault on her authority. Ben-Gurion did not want to enter into an emotional and sterile argument and left the job to Eshkol and Sapir. They needed no convincing that Golda must remain and not abandon another post to the younger leaders because they saw Eban as another one of Ben-Gurion's Young Turks. Finally she yielded, but placed a condition. She was prepared to remain in the cabinet but once again as minister of labor and not as foreign minister. In the end, she relented.<sup>6</sup> Her idea of going back to the Ministry of Labor did not win her much popularity among the senior officials of the Foreign Ministry who watched with unhidden rage her impotence when it came to waging the perennial struggle between the Foreign and Defense Ministries. Aranne remained as minister of education, but not for long. He resigned in 1960, following a long conflict with the teachers union. Before leaving, he quipped: "I read about the eskimos that when they age and

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<sup>6</sup> Bar-Zohar, Ben-Gurion, pp. 1467–1469.

their teeth fall out, they are removed to the edge of the ice cap, given some food and left to die. But we, the veterans, we still have teeth”.<sup>7</sup>

In those days, Golda became closer to Aranne. Like Remez and Shazar, with whom she had had romantic involvements, Aranne (with whom she did not) was also a close friend. He was an intellectual, a brilliant orator, with vast knowledge about Jewish and Hebrew culture and he was also a “doer”. His service to the party included a stint as the secretary general of the Histadrut and minister of education. She appreciated his analytical mind, his acute political senses, his ability to get things done and his talent to predict coming events. Like Golda, he was a product of the Third Aliyah and a great admirer of Ben-Gurion. There was still a problem of what to do with Eban. That bothered Golda much less. Once she decided to remain in the Foreign Ministry, Ben-Gurion informed Eban that he would serve as minister without portfolio with responsibility for foreign policy under the overall authority of Golda Meir. He would even be given an office in the ministry. Golda rejected this idea out of hand. She remembered the abortive proposal of June 1956 and told Eban, according to his own testimony, that while he possessed all the attributes to become foreign minister one day, he had talents above and beyond those necessary for deputy foreign minister. While waiting for his turn, she suggested, the best thing for him would be to deal with other matters. She added that any extended diplomatic activity on his part was bound to damage her authority.<sup>8</sup> Eban would have to wait for five long years before he was given the coveted ministry by then-prime minister Levi Eshkol. Eban was not angry at the Old Guard, apart from Ben-Gurion, whom he accused of leading him on a false trail and making him believe that the Foreign Ministry was his for the asking. Eban underwent a very rapid process of “aging”. He was put in the cabinet by Ben-Gurion as a Young Turk, but soon realized that the real power still rested with the veterans, he quickly switched loyalties and hitched his political future to them.

The Mapai veterans began to seek trustworthy allies in Achdut Ha'avodah. Formally, this party was still in the opposition, but it began to play an increasing role in determining Mapai's policies. Achdut Ha'avodah was led mainly by native-born Israelis, who were “hawkish” in their views. Some of them, like Yigal Allon, earned vast military experience in the Hagannah and the Palmach before and during the War of Independence. After they shed their previous pro-Soviet and Marxist leanings, they found common language with the voluntary-Socialist ideology of Mapai's elders who did not accept Ben-Gurion's concept of statism, an

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<sup>7</sup> Quoted by Eshed, *Who Gave the Order*, p. 190.

<sup>8</sup> Robert St. John, *Eban*, London, 1973, p. 360; see also Eban, *Autobiography*, p. 276.

ideology adopted by the younger leaders of Mapai. They were willing to cooperate with the Mapai elders in order to terminate their long and sterile time in the opposition. It was obvious that this new alignment was unwelcomed by Dayan, Peres and their allies who were afraid that they could be forced out of the key positions they had just gained after the 1959 elections.

In 1960, Israel was thrown into another period of political turmoil due to two dramatic events. The first was the capture of Adolf Eichmann by Mossad agents in Buenos Aires and his removal to Israel in order to stand trial. Ben-Gurion insisted that the younger generation of Israelis must know and fully grasp the horrors of the Holocaust to better understand the background for the establishment of Israel and the need to preserve it. As noted earlier, Golda traveled to New York in June 1960 to defend Israel's position before the Security Council, something she did with much emotion and conviction. The second event, perhaps less dramatic than the first, but one that held vast consequences for Israel's future, took place around the time Eichmann was kidnapped in Argentina. This event, probably more than any other, would hasten the end of Ben-Gurion's leadership of the country and party.<sup>9</sup>

In May 1960, Pinchas Lavon met with Ben-Gurion and complained that a number of senior IDF officers had forged documents pertaining to the 1954 affair in Egypt and that he possessed information about this. These documents could help him confirm his claim that he was innocent of any responsibility for that affair that shortened his term as defense minister. Ben-Gurion charged his military aide, Chaim Ben David, to investigate, and soon it became apparent that a number of documents were indeed forged. At the end of August 1960, the head of the Israel spy network in Egypt, Avri Elad, was put on trial and found guilty of being a double agent—for Israel and for Egypt.<sup>10</sup> Doubts about his loyalty grew because of his close ties with the Egyptian military attaché in Bonn and suspicion arose that he was the one who had betrayed the ring to the Egyptians. In the course of his secret trial, he testified that the director of military intelligence at the time, Colonel Benjamin Gibli, ordered him to bear false testimony before the

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<sup>9</sup> On the developments in the Lavon Affair see Eshed, *Who Gave the Order*; Natan Yanai, *Split at the Top*, Tel Aviv, 1969; Bar-Zohar, *Ben-Gurion*; Golan, *Peres*; Shlomo Ahronson, *Nuclear Weapons in the Middle East 1948–2013*, Jerusalem, 2011; Zaki Shalom, *Between Dimona and Washington—the Struggle for the Development of Israel's Nuclear Option 1960–1968*, Sede Boker, 2004; see also Bar-Zohar, *Phoenix*, pp. 328–339; Goldstein, *Eshkol*, pp. 417–433; Hassin and Horowitz, *The Affair*; see also Adam Raz, *The Struggle Over the Bomb*, Jerusalem, 2015, and Udi Manor, *Yigal Allon, A Political Biography 1949–1980*, Or Yehuda, 2016. See also Avi Shilon, *Ben-Gurion, His Later Years in the Political Wilderness*, Lanham, 2016, pp. 56–58.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

Olshan-Dori Commission established by Sharett in late 1954 to investigate that calamity. Elad was sentenced to twelve years in prison which he served fully. When he was released, he left Israel and wrote his memoirs.

Ben-Gurion now ordered the IDF Chief of Staff, General Chaim Laskov, to establish an additional commission of inquiry which was headed by Supreme Court Justice Haim Cohen. The committee determined that while there were no forgeries, there was an attempt to suborn a witness. With this in hand, Lavon demanded that Ben-Gurion publicly proclaim his innocence of any wrongdoing. The Israeli media got hold of the story. Ben-Gurion refused to exonerate Lavon of any charge, saying he was not a judge and only an authorized court of justice could do that. He was prepared to offer Lavon another, this time a judicial commission of inquiry. But Lavon had had enough of commissions and refused the offer, insisting that unless he was granted full and immediate rehabilitation, he would inform the Knesset Defense and Foreign Affairs Committee everything he knew. He in fact did so in October 1960 and the contents of his testimony were systematically leaked to the media. Lavon attacked the heads of Mapai, the heads of the Ministry of Defense and senior IDF officers and charged them with bearing false testimony, covering up for disastrous operations that cost many innocent lives. All this was explosive grist in the hands of the opposition. Not only Herut, but the heads of Achdut Ha'avodah avidly fell on this treasure trove.

Mapai's elders realized at once the explosive situation they found themselves in and quickly decided that two things had to be done: rehabilitate Lavon's name and then oust him from his present position as Histadrut secretary general. He was charged with washing dirty laundry in public, thus hurting his party's leaders and image. Golda was in New York in October 1960, attending the annual session of the United Nations General Assembly, but her aides made sure that she was given full details on Lavon's testimony and the ensuing moves. In a meeting with Eshkol, who was also in New York for a meeting of the World Bank, both heard new details from Epharim Evron, who served as Lavon's head of bureau in 1954–1955. They realized that the head of the IDF Intelligence Branch did issue an order to forge documents to incriminate Lavon, who claimed that the person who actually forged the document was Colonel Gibli's secretary Daliah Carmel, then in the army and soon to become a very close intimate friend of Levi Eshkol. Irrespective of this, Eshkol and Golda were determined that Lavon must go. This might appease Ben-Gurion and restore some sanity to the torn party. The Mapai leadership succeeded in foisting on Ben-Gurion the appointment of a ministerial committee consisting of seven ministers who would decide what to do. Ben-Gurion reluctantly agreed to this new move, but stressed that it was a political and not a judicial committee. Perhaps he still hoped that this body would recommend the creation of a judicial commission of inquiry that would have full authority

to deal with Lavon's demands, summon witnesses and make recommendations based on sworn testimonies.

The veteran leaders felt this move was the correct one. It would give the party time to organize itself in order to better deal with this ongoing crisis and perhaps even temporarily pacify Ben-Gurion. But they failed to properly assess the depth of his feelings on this issue. They may have naïvely thought that soon the “old man” would tire of this affair and find something else to deal with. They were totally wrong. Ben-Gurion was determined to put his party, his comrades and the State of Israel to the test: He was adamant that Israel must be run on the basis of the rule of law and not on reasons and considerations of political convenience. His comrades were already fed up with the prolonged struggles and realized with growing horror that the party was destroying itself and that friendships lasting decades were being eroded. The task of the Committee of Seven was ostensibly to study the evidence and decide if the subject had to be brought to the cabinet so that a final decision could be made. The chairman of the Committee, Justice Minister Pinchas Rosen, promised Ben-Gurion that its conclusions would be mostly of an administrative nature. But when he presented the conclusions to the entire cabinet on December 25, 1960, they consisted of the determination that whereas the committee lacked trust in Gibli's version of the events, however they concluded that Lavon had not given the order to activate the spy ring in Egypt in the summer of 1954. Ben-Gurion was furious and accused the committee members that they had become a court of law without proper authority and without the required legal procedure. The cabinet approved the committee's conclusions and Ben-Gurion announced that he was taking leave, following which he would tender his resignation to the president of Israel. Even before he began to speak, Golda left the cabinet room, wrote a letter of resignation and handed it for safe-keeping with Eshkol. He never used it and it was soon forgotten. Ben-Gurion did tender his resignation at the end of January 1961 and it was evident that in return for cancelling his resignation, he would demand the removal of Lavon from the Histadrut. On February 1, 1961, Golda participated in a discussion of the Mapai ministers held in Ben-Gurion's room at the Sharon Hotel in Herzliyah where he repeated his demand that Lavon must go. The ministers accepted this demand mainly on the basis of Lavon's recriminating testimony before the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee that was systematically leaked to the press.

By now Golda was fed up. She was totally opposed to additional investigations and claimed they would harm certain comrades and the entire party. She wanted to end the affair in the best Mapai tradition: by a small closed forum with no further ado. She failed to understand why Ben-Gurion was so incensed. She did not realize that the “old man” was appalled by the very fact that during his



testimony at the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee Lavon maligned the reputation of the IDF, revealed top secret operations that were either planned or in some cases even executed in the bad years of 1954–1955. Some of them resulted in the loss of lives. The Israeli public began to sense that rot had set in and began to spread in Mapai and questions were being asked about the ability of that party to continue to lead the nation. Golda, Aranne and Eshkol were convinced that Ben-Gurion had become mentally unbalanced. They felt that eventually he would have to go, but it was too early now to oust him. Ben-Gurion postponed his resignation until January 31, 1961, because of the sessions of the World Zionist Congress and because of another major problem—the discovery by the United States of the Israeli nuclear plant in Dimona. During those days, another idea was mooted: the creation of a party committee to determine what to do with Lavon.

On January 11, 1961, this committee was established to investigate Lavon's actions during the period of the "Nasty Business" and propose what to do with him. Lavon naturally objected to this move and even Golda, who was elected as one of the five members of this party panel, refused to take part in its deliberations. Thus, she in fact prevented the party from resolving this painful affair in the normal way, namely by a small group of people far from the prying eyes of the sensation-seeking Israeli media. She still feared Ben-Gurion's reaction. She realized that even after decades of working together, she and her comrades failed to understand his views on issues that had nothing to do with party or national politics. The issue now involved morality and principles. They felt that they were no less principled than Ben-Gurion, but morality took second place in their considerations how to terminate this embarrassing affair as quickly as possible.

Golda quickly came to the inevitable conclusion that the affair must be resolved at once before it destroyed the party, and if Lavon would have to be sacrificed, so be it. Hopefully this would appease Ben-Gurion and calm things down. The next move was to convene the party secretariat. This body met on February 4, 1961, the Mapai Secretariat voted to oust Lavon from his post as secretary general of the Histadrut. In a secret ballot, 159 voted in favor, 96 opposed and 5 abstained. The party leaders who now prayed that this would usher in a temporary truce, once again failed to assess Ben-Gurion's feelings. He refused to let the matter die peacefully and continued to demand the appointment of a judicial committee of inquiry. His comrades were determined to bury the affair. For some reason, perhaps to explain her stand to the public, Golda agreed to appear before a student committee made up of Mapai students at the Hebrew University. Strange as it may seem, the only body that really operated in those days was a student body. She was asked by the students, some of whom would become leaders of the Labor Party in the end of the 1980's, why she refused to participate in the Committee of Five. Her answer was simple: she feared that if

Lavon was not removed, Ben-Gurion would resign and at the time she saw no reason for such a resignation. However, she added, while Eshkol thought that the choice was either Lavon or Ben-Gurion, she was not convinced that this was the only choice and thought that even if Ben-Gurion resigned, the country would not collapse. This was the first time Golda publicly mentioned the possibility of Ben-Gurion's resignation. When things calmed down, it was clear that while Lavon was exonerated by the committee of seven ministers, he was ousted by a majority of his party members. The main loser, as it turned out, would be Ben-Gurion. His public image was badly hurt and the intra- and interparty opposition to him were now joined by a number of well-known professors and some younger university lecturers in the Hebrew University who called for justice and fairness in public life and was arrayed against yielding to what they called Ben-Gurion's dictates and idiosyncracies. In the course of February 1961, Ben-Gurion himself raised the possibility that the next government would be put together by Eshkol, this time without Ben-Gurion. He may have sensed that his time was running out. But it was too early for that. The Mapai leadership once again met, this time in the residence of the foreign minister in Jerusalem, and Golda removed this idea from the agenda. She argued that among other reasons, such a government would be at the mercy of other parties.

Slowly the party leaders came to the conclusion that the problems of Israel could be dealt with without Ben-Gurion's leadership. The aging leader barely took part in the Knesset election campaign that was forced on Israel because of Ben-Gurion's resignation and the dissolution of the Knesset. The election date was now set for August 1961. As usual, Golda participated in the campaign and made many appearances. However, this time she was not fully convinced of the righteousness of the party and it was clear that lacking self-conviction, it was hard for her to convince others. The public sensed that something was wrong with Mapai, but did not yet fully understand the deep divisions within the party's leadership. Mapai was still able to point out that the Herut party, and mainly the man who headed it, Menachem Begin, were unfit to govern Israel, and for the time being there were no other alternatives among the other parties. The public continued to vote for Ben-Gurion out of a sense of inertia, but the party did suffer a loss which signalled the beginning of the end of Mapai as the ruling party until it would be removed from power in the May 1977 upset elections. In the elections held on August 15, 1961, Mapai lost five seats in the Knesset and now had 42 mandates. Achdut Ha'avodah retained its eight seats, Mapam won nine. There was hardly any change in the representation of the other parties. Ben-Gurion could rightly claim that the Israeli electoral system once again brought paralysis. He demonstrated little interest in the coalition-building process and left the task to Levi Eshkol. The "old man" began to

spend more time in isolation in Sede Boker although he did display continued interest in defense and foreign affairs.

It was obvious to Golda that now was not the time to abandon the cabinet. Her retirement would be seen as abandoning the control of party and nation to the younger leaders and as a serious blow to the veterans. She decided to remain at her post in the Foreign Ministry. Eban would have to be consoled by becoming minister of education and culture. The main change in the cabinet makeup was the entry of Achdut Ha'avodah to the coalition, which was seen as a major boost to the older Mapai leaders. All felt the failing powers of Ben-Gurion. He would have preferred the Liberals (former General Zionists) in the cabinet instead of Achdut Ha'avodah, but failed. Yigal Allon now joined the cabinet as minister of labor and mainly as a counterweight to Dayan. Yitzhak Ben-Aharon would be the counterforce to Yosef Almogi while Mapam preferred to remain outside the coalition. When he presented his last cabinet to the Knesset on November 2, 1961, Ben-Gurion did not display a great sense of pride. As he continued to demand the creation of a judicial committee of inquiry to resolve the "Affair", Mapai's elder leaders gave up the hope that he could be persuaded to abandon the entire messy business. In private conversations, some of them claimed that he had lost his sanity. On several occasions Golda told close friends that the key question was when and under what conditions he would retire and would he do so of his own free will or be forced to resign.

Meanwhile the group of veteran leaders called the "Troika", consisting of Golda Meir, Zalman Aranne and Pinchas Sapir, emerged as the main force in the party. They won the unstinting support of Achdut Ha'avodah, mainly that of Yisrael Galili and Yigal Allon. Both had long accounts to settle with Ben-Gurion; Galili from the time Ben-Gurion removed him from his post as the Hagannah chief of staff on the eve of independence and later as deputy defense minister in June 1948. Allon never forgave Ben-Gurion for removing him from his post as Commanding Officer Southern Front while he was abroad and replacing him with his arch rival Moshe Dayan. The "Troika", aided by Allon, Galili and Ben-Aharon, were able to stem the influence of the younger Mapai leaders for the time being and slowly began to penetrate the two areas in which Ben-Gurion still displayed much interest: defense and foreign affairs. They were no longer certain of his judgment. Ben-Gurion was aging rapidly and ceased to be considered as the final arbiter when it came to key national and party matters.

If the heads of Mapai looked for a final proof that he had lost his judgment, Ben-Gurion's hasty and unconsidered reaction to the establishment of the tripartite federation between Iraq, Syria and Egypt initiated by Nasser in April 1963 gave them the answer. This new body, called the Arab Federation, alarmed Ben-Gurion who was particularly worried about the future of Jordan. The possible downfall

of the Jordanian monarch would involve Israel almost automatically in a war that would result (as it did in June 1967) in the occupation of the West Bank with its hundreds of thousands of Palestinian inhabitants, something Ben-Gurion sought to prevent at all cost. He embarked on a campaign of writing letters to world leaders, among them Presidents Kennedy, De Gaulle, prime minister Nehru and he even sent a note to Khrushchev. He proposed the setting up of a defense treaty between Israel the United States and/or France. He was deeply disappointed by the chilly response of Kennedy and De Gaulle who did not seem to take his concerns seriously and felt Ben-Gurion was responding with unnecessary emotion. Even his comrades felt this was out of order. Golda later said that even though he never involved the Foreign Ministry in his moves and failed to consult her or her senior diplomats, she was fully aware of what he was doing. “We had much respect for Ben-Gurion as prime minister and defense minister, for his personality and his place in the establishment of the state and moulding its path. He acted in this move as he did as prime minister and we said nothing although we were amazed”.

Ben-Gurion’s final two years as prime minister and defense minister were pathetic. They have been fully described by his biographer Michael Bar Zohar and by historians Shlomo Aronson and Avi Shillon. Since Ben-Gurion never surrounded himself with close confidants and party cronies, this time he isolated himself almost completely from his comrades and felt lonely and helpless. He continued to argue that Mapai decided to abandon the truth in the Lavon Affair for the sake of what he considered political convenience. For that purpose, he feared, the party heads were prepared to sacrifice fundamental principles such as the truth and the moral integrity of the ruling party. This was not the model he attempted to instill among the younger generation of Israelis. What sort of ideology were these leaders offering them, he wondered? What path would Israel follow in the future? In 1962, he asked the “Davar” journalist Haggai Eshed to unofficially investigate the affair, hoping the material he would unearth would strengthen his demand for a judicial inquiry, and was prepared to wait until this study would be completed.

In the summer of 1962, he embarked on official visits to a number of Scandinavian countries. Golda attended as usual the annual session of the United Nations General Assembly. Peres continued to cement the ties between the Israeli Defense Ministry and the West German one. In August 1962, President Kennedy authorized the sale of ground-to-air “Hawk” missiles to Israel. But in spite of this achievement, Ben-Gurion’s standing was steadily sinking. At the end of 1962, he spent weeks at home and later in Sede Boker recovering from a bout of pneumonia. To complete his convalescence, he spent several weeks in Tiberias in March 1963. It was then that a new scandal erupted that led directly to his final resignation.

The Mossad had recently been tracking a number of German scientists working in Egypt to help develop that country's missiles, jet fighters and chemical weapons capabilities. The word spread quickly and the opposition fell on this treasure with much glee. Begin and other Herut leaders accused Ben-Gurion that while he was developing special relations with the Government of the Federal Republic of Germany, German scientists were involved in helping the Arabs to annihilate the remnants of the Holocaust survivors in Israel. The head of the Mossad himself, Isser Harel, Golda's close political ally and an old foe of Shimon Peres, led the anti-Ben-Gurion campaign. It was easier to deflect the fire from Ben-Gurion and turn it on Peres who was responsible for the ties with the government of West Germany. Peres was more vulnerable than Ben-Gurion and Harel knew this well. Harel also possessed political aspirations of his own and at one time even harbored the desire to be appointed deputy prime minister in charge of the secret services. This idea was rejected out of hand by Ben-Gurion and the veteran Mapai leaders. They claimed such a position existed only in totalitarian countries. Undaunted, Harel continued his work and even strengthened his position in other areas, apart from intelligence and internal security. He was more involved in domestic politics now, something that as a very senior civil servant he should have stayed away from. His prestige soared after the capture of Eichmann and his ideas how to deal with the German scientists fell on fertile ground. These ideas included sending letter bombs to the scientists and to threaten them and their families in Egypt and in Germany to desist from their work. In one instance, an Israeli agent was captured by the Swiss police in Basel when he threatened the daughter of one of the scientists. This was highly embarrassing. Ben-Gurion received information on this event in Tiberias and decided not to write to Chancellor Adenauer to intercede with the Swiss authorities to release the captured Israeli agent. Harel threatened to make public the capture of the agent and cause serious damage to the government of Israel. Meanwhile he decided to launch a media campaign both in Israel and in Germany by sending a number of Israeli reporters to Germany. They sent back extensive stories describing in great detail the involvement of German scientists in developing weapons of mass destruction in Egypt. He also briefed a number of Israeli reporters at home and this only heightened the sense of alarm and fear in Israel. Less than 15 years after the Holocaust, once again Israel was being threatened by Germans. Ironically, as noted by Teddy Kollek, the director general of the Prime Minister's Office, Harel sent to Germany the head of the Government Press Office to coordinate the campaign there. Here was a case where two departments in the Prime Minister's Office were used in a campaign against the wishes of the prime minister.

The opposition initiated a Knesset discussion of this affair in March 1963. Even before the meeting started, Golda had shown to the heads of all political parties

the contents of her statement and asked for a respectable and peaceful debate. Her statement and the resolution to be voted upon were drafted by Simcha Dinitz and approved by Ben-Gurion by phone from Tiberias. In her statement, Golda said that in these very days German scientists were developing banned weapons for the only purpose of annihilating Israel. She rejected the claim of the German government that it lacked legal means to block this activity outside its borders. She of course called on the German government to take all means to stop the work of the scientists in Egypt.<sup>11</sup> She and Harel did not agree with Ben-Gurion's argument that the real threat to Israel derived from the constant flow of conventional Soviet-made weapons to Egypt, mainly jet fighters and medium-range bombers. Israel asked the German government to supply it with anti-aircraft artillery. The Knesset discussion was stormy. Begin lashed out at Ben-Gurion and Golda did not go out of her way to challenge him.

In the midst of this turmoil, Peres returned from one of his many secret visits to Germany and warned Ben-Gurion that if the anti-German campaign continued it would endanger the flow of German arms to Israel. Peres also argued that this campaign orchestrated by Harel with Golda's tacit blessing could seriously harm the possibility of the establishment of diplomatic relations between Germany and Israel, something both Ben-Gurion and Peres wanted and Golda had opposed for a long time. Ben-Gurion realized that things relating to the very delicate ties between Israel and Germany had gotten out of control. He summoned Harel and ordered him to coordinate any future moves relating to Germany with him and not to discuss this with others, meaning primarily Foreign Minister Golda Meir. Ben-Gurion did something else quite extraordinary. He summoned Peres, chief of staff Tsvi Tsur, and the head of the IDF Intelligence Branch Meir Amit and asked them to explain to him in detail the extent of the activities of the German scientists in Egypt and above all how serious the threat it posed to Israel was. He learned from them that for the time being the threat was minimal and that German scientists had failed to overcome complicated technical problems relating to the launching and guidance mechanism of the missiles. They also advised that the Egyptian plans for the development of chemical weapons were at a very early stage and were of no immediate danger. Armed with this information, Ben-Gurion summoned Harel once again and demanded an end to the anti-German campaign and he also wanted Harel to explain on what he based his assessment regarding the nature and dimensions of the threat. Ben-Gurion thus made it clear to Harel that he no longer trusted his judgment.

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<sup>11</sup> Statement in the Knesset 20 March 1963.

Harel tended his resignation, saying Ben-Gurion had lost confidence in him. Ben-Gurion immediately appointed General Amit, the head of the Intelligence Branch of the IDF, as temporary head of the Mossad. This round ended, for the time being, with the defeat of Golda and Harel and the victory of Peres. On April 1, 1963, the Israeli media, under tight military censorship, hinted that a “senior official” had resigned. The censorship banned the publication of his name, position and the reasons that led him to resign. But the media was able to circumvent the censorship. One daily paper printed on its front page a long story on heads of intelligence services in other countries who resigned.

Golda may have lost this battle, but she won the war. This affair further weakened Ben-Gurion’s standing and authority. He was now forced to defend his German policy and fight for the continuation of the special ties with that country. In the course of May 1963, Golda and Ben-Gurion had a number of acrimonious meetings on the issue of future diplomatic relations between the two countries, a move she deeply opposed. On Saturday evening, June 15, 1963, Golda came to the prime minister’s residence on Ben Maimon Street in Jerusalem. She brought a news item by the German press agency that Israeli soldiers were being trained on German soil in the use of German weapons. She demanded that Ben-Gurion, in his capacity as defense minister, order the military censor to block the publication of this item in the Israeli media to avoid another outburst of emotions in the Knesset and among the general public. He refused and said that he lacked the authority to do so, as this story originated abroad and could not be censored in Israel. From his residence, Golda went to Eshkol who suggested that she talk to Teddy Kollek. Teddy accompanied her back to Ben-Gurion’s residence, where a highly emotional discussion ensued. She complained as usual about the manner in which Peres and the Defense Ministry ran the ties with Germany; “how will we face the Knesset and the people?”<sup>12</sup> she asked. “There must be an end to this, this cannot go on”. The arguments ended at midnight without the quarrel being resolved.

The next morning, Ben-Gurion arrived at his office and just before the start of the weekly cabinet meeting he called in the acting head of his bureau Uri Lubrani (Navon being on leave to arrange his wedding) and informed him that he had resigned. Horrified, Lubrani told the news to the Mapai ministers who began to arrive for the meeting. Golda burst into tears and the Mapai ministers demanded

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<sup>12</sup> For a description of this conversation see Teddy Kollek, *For the Sake of Jerusalem*, Jerusalem 1975, pp. 169–170; Yanai, *Split at the Top*, pp. 11–15; Eshed, *Who Gave the Order*, p. 301; Bar-Zohar, *Ben-Gurion*, p. 1555; see also Ahronson, *Ben-Gurion*, pp. 336–390; David Ben-Gurion, *Things as They Are*, Tel Aviv, 1965; Rosenthal et al., eds., *Ben-Gurion, Israel’s First Prime Minister*, pp. 493–506.

that Ben-Gurion retract his resignation. He agreed to remain in the Knesset but not in the cabinet. In the early afternoon, the news spread and struck the public. Israelis were not yet ready for this development and failed to understand the reasons. That evening, members of General Staff came to see Ben-Gurion at his home in Tel Aviv. Rabin spoke for the generals, almost in tears, pleading with Ben-Gurion to remain for the sake of the army. At the same time the Mapai ministers and Knesset faction members met at Golda's residence in Jerusalem. The mood was now decidedly calmer and so was the resolution. Ben-Gurion would be asked to retract his resignation, if he refused (which they knew he would), the party would recommend to the president of Israel the appointment of Levi Eshkol as his successor.<sup>13</sup> As expected, Ben-Gurion rejected the plea, sent a letter of resignation to the president and it became effective two days later.

It was obvious to Ben-Gurion that Golda had played a central role in the long process that left him with no choice but to resign. On June 16, 1963, he noted in his diary that the lack of vision of Golda and Eshkol undermined the party. He was not certain whether Golda headed the campaign against him or whether she was dragged by others who wanted to end his political career.<sup>14</sup> The evidence shows that Golda indeed led this campaign, aided by Sapir and Aranne who had lost all hope that Ben-Gurion would change his German policy. But the conflict with him focused on much more than that and had far greater implications for the future of Israel—it involved the struggle for the country's leadership and above all its soul and future direction. The Mapai veterans had had enough of what they called Ben-Gurion's whims and obsessions and stopped relying on his judgment. That evening, they came to the conclusion that they were finally relieved from the shadow of the "old man" and could now focus on running the country and party the way they saw fit, with no earthquakes, radical shifts of mood, threats of resignation or changing the electoral system. From now on life would be easier, less dramatic, but deep in their heart they also knew that the founding father who espoused values of morality, ethics, justice and rule of law had finally vacated the political arena. True, in the coming years, some of them would on occasion ask how Ben-Gurion would have handled any given situation, but life continued, the state remained extant and intact, the tensions evaporated. Ben-Gurion's slow and painful political demise was distressing and at times humiliating. The veterans realized that the old leader had lost his teeth and was a useless tool. They wanted peace and quiet in politics. Soon Eshkol

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<sup>13</sup> Gad Ya'acobi, *The Government*, Tel Aviv, 1980, p. 146; see also Isser Harel, *The Crisis over the German Scientists in Egypt*, Tel Aviv, 1983.

<sup>14</sup> Ben-Gurion Diary, 16 June 1963, quoted by Bar-Zohar, *Ben-Gurion*, p. 1557.



would proclaim: “Give us a chance to live in peace and quiet in this country”. They tired of the storms, the tempestuous behavior, the unpredicted moods and their inability to predict them.

Why was Eshkol selected as prime minister? Most likely for a simple reason, namely that Golda Meir was not interested in the position at this time. If she had insisted, she probably would have been handed it on a silver platter. She was by now the senior among the Mapai leaders. She may have felt that she was not yet ripe for the job and certainly did not want to succeed Ben-Gurion. Comparisons that were inevitably bound to be made would be highly uncomplimentary. She may have thought of the fate of Anthony Eden who succeeded Churchill, or that of Erhard who followed Adenauer, or of Pompidou who followed De Gaulle. If fate decreed that she would succeed Eshkol, it would be much easier for her to step into his shoes than those of Ben-Gurion. She did not want to create the impression that she and her comrades had deposed Ben-Gurion so she could take his place. At this stage, she would be happy to remain foreign minister and let Eshkol assume the office of prime minister without additional turmoil. Eshkol never presented a real threat to the veteran Mapai leaders. They trusted his judgment, his good common sense, his sense of humor and ability to resolve tensions with a good joke in Yiddish, they knew that his specialty was in economics and in concocting political deals and that he would never interfere in matters of which he knew little. Above all he was a team player, liked to work with people, to reach decisions in large forums, his reactions were predictable, and above all—he lacked charisma, and that was the secret of his success at the beginning of his term as prime minister. He did surprise many of his friends when he displayed a good ability for leadership. In retrospect, he is considered the best prime minister of Israel apart from the founding father.

Ben-Gurion’s unexpected resignation left his younger subordinates without a political patron and with no political support. The old-timers secured their survival and the issue of the succession was deferred for at least ten years. When the veterans finally vacated the political arena, it was after a bloody and vicious war that some of them, rightly or wrongly, were accused of provoking—the Yom Kippur War. The irony was that the only younger leader who survived was Shimon Peres, who would serve as defense minister under Rabin, foreign minister under Shamir and Rabin, twice prime minister until, at 84 in 2007, he was elected and served a full seven-year term until 2014 as one of the most popular presidents Israel ever had. Moshe Dayan would serve as minister of defense in the national unity government and later as Begin’s foreign minister and played a key role in the negotiations that led to the Israel-Egypt peace treaty. Eban would survive in the Foreign Ministry until 1974 and was deposed by Yitzhak Rabin who gave that post to Yigal Allon.

In retrospect, it appears that the veteran leaders made a serious mistake when they insisted that Israel become a normal state. They gave the Israelis the feeling that the days of creation and construction were over, the time of sacrifice and austerity had ended and there was no longer need for hard work and pioneering. The country could now relax and enjoy the fruits of the work of the founding generation. In this manner, the veteran leaders removed from the Israeli people the spirit of pioneering but they did not replace it by other values, principles and directions. Consequently, the ideological foundations that marked Israel's early years weakened. The leaders did speak in terms of the great struggles still facing Israel, however, when they spoke of the great challenges ahead, it was not with the zeal, ardor and conviction that characterized Ben-Gurion, the flag bearer and the visionary who had just been deposed. The nation had now lost its prophet and teacher. The road was open to new ideas, some of them fanatic and messianic, that emerged four years later, many of them as a result of the Six Days War.

For the time being, the veteran leaders decided that the transfer of power from Ben-Gurion to his successor would be carried out quickly and resolutely and Ben-Gurion cooperated initially. Eshkol inherited the premiership and the Defense Ministry to ensure that the latter would not fall to the hands of Dayan or Peres or even Yigal Allon. Aranne agreed to return to the cabinet but under the condition that he would be given back the post of minister of education and culture. For Eban, they found a simple and cruel arrangement. He was appointed to the empty and meaningless post of deputy prime minister. The "Troika" reigned, and in it Golda became the leading personality. She was now the dominant figure in both the cabinet and in Mapai. Her influence on Eshkol was vast. He realized that he had attained the premiership much because of her and was very careful to give her all due honors. They were equals, but she was more equal. The influence of Dayan and Peres waned. Eshkol gave Golda free reign in foreign policy. Rabin, who was appointed chief of staff on January 1, 1964, also enjoyed much freedom of action and in fact became for all intents and purposes acting defense minister as Peres's influence weakened and Eshkol came to rely more on Rabin. Sapir asked for and received freedom to run the economy. Eshkol was magnanimous. He asked Peres to remain in the Defense Ministry and offered to help mend the fences with Golda. Peres remained, so did Dayan as minister of agriculture. But both knew their days were numbered. A sigh of relief was heard in the Foreign Ministry. There would no longer be surprises from the Prime Minister's Office and the defense establishment. Surely, Eshkol would have to be more involved, but Israel's foreign policy would finally be determined by the professional diplomats. Their esteem of Golda grew as they realized that no major decisions relating to Israel's foreign relations would be made without Golda's approval and involvement.

Soon, and with no premeditated plan, Eshkol began a slow process of “de-Ben-Gurionization”. He wanted to give Israel a new image, that of a country open to new ideas and far more flexible in its responses. One of the first things he did in order to change Israel’s image as a stubborn and rigid nation, constantly rejecting any compromise, was to call Nasser, who until then was always referred to on Israel radio and other official outlets as the “Egyptian dictator”, by his title, president. Eshkol was a man of compromise, saying “each one is in love with his own compromises”. He was by nature a moderate person, far from extremes who shied away from confrontations. Soon the Israeli public began to like him and forgave some errors he made. However, as long as Ben-Gurion was active in the Knesset and did not forget about the Affair, Eshkol still lived under his shadow and had to take into account his views, at least in the first few months after taking office. The veteran leaders realized that as long as some of Ben-Gurion’s underlings were serving in Eshkol’s cabinet, there was bound to be trouble, and they were not wrong.

As time went on, Golda, Aranne and Sapir came to rely more on the Achdut Ha’avodah politicians. Almost from his first day in office as prime minister, Eshkol offered them a full union with Mapai. They responded by saying they would view the idea favorably but in return for a clear commitment on the part of Eshkol that he would freeze any move designed to change the electoral system. They also demanded that Lavon’s name be cleared. Eshkol agreed to both demands, and if at some point he and Golda thought that there was some merit in Ben-Gurion’s demand to change the electoral system, now for the sake of unity with Achdut Ha’avodah, they agreed to abandon the matter, thus providing Ben-Gurion with another reason to question their political integrity. In May 1964, Eshkol sent a letter to a group of Lavon’s supporters in which he declared that Lavon’s ouster that he himself had proposed in 1961 was now null and void. Although it was a personal letter from the prime minister and did not commit the entire party, Eshkol now openly challenged Ben-Gurion. He went further and refused to appoint another judiciary committee of inquiry to deal with the Lavon Affair, knowing fully well that the majority of Mapai membership supported him on that matter and he could quietly ignore Ben-Gurion’s insistent demands. Golda supported Eshkol throughout. But Ben-Gurion refused to yield. At the end of 1963, he received the material gathered by the journalist Haggai Eshed and based on new revelations, he renewed his demand for an inquiry. Justice Minister Dov Yoseph and Attorney General Moshe Ben Zeev thought there was some merit in his call and recommended that the cabinet thoroughly investigate the events of 1954 and not those of 1960. Eshkol initially agreed, but under massive pressure from Golda changed his mind. She was adamant. As far as she was concerned, the Lavon Affair was done and buried. The country was tired of the entire affair, she argued.

He who calls for a renewed inquiry is actually calling for Eshkol's resignation. She knew fully well that no Mapai leader was willing to take this risk. The party was in the process of rehabilitation after the many storms that buffeted Mapai; a renewed inquiry, they feared, would not only halt the rehabilitation but would add nothing to the party apart from caving in to Ben-Gurion's whims. While she thought that truth and justice were important, what was more important to her at the time was not to endanger the future of the party and undermine its foundations. Who knew, she may have felt, perhaps Ben-Gurion was right and had a case, and public opinion might turn on his side. In that case she and her colleagues would have to pay a heavy price.

In order to prevent a call for a commission of inquiry, Eshkol took an unusual step. On December 13, 1964, he tendered his resignation to the president of Israel, who promptly charged him with forming a new cabinet. This he did within a week, and excluded from the cabinet Justice Minister Dov Yosef who supported Ben Gurion's call to re-open the affair. That spelled the end of the demand to reopen the Affair. The new cabinet simply did not deal with the recommendations of the minister of justice and the attorney general. Ben-Gurion now railed at the prime minister, charging that Eshkol violated the accepted decision-making process that had prevailed in Mapai for decades and had not involved the party's governing institutions in his moves. Ben-Gurion's call to return to orderly decision-making processes was greeted with much derision by the party elders who reminded him of some of the methods he had used in his days in office. He retorted by saying the party had become a disciplined herd led by Golda and Eshkol, based on considerations of fear. The party was now launched on the road to a split between those who demanded that Eshkol discuss all key issues with the authorized party institutions and those led by Eshkol and Meir who were certain they had a majority in the governing bodies of the party and refused to bow to Ben-Gurion's dictates. As expected, Achdut Ha'avodah supported Eshkol. The young Mapai leaders realized they had no room in the cabinet. The first to draw the right conclusion was Moshe Dayan, who in November 1964 tendered his resignation as minister of agriculture, saying he had lost the confidence of the prime minister. He was followed in early 1965 by Shimon Peres.

The great drama reached its climax when Mapai held its party convention in February 1965. The 2,200 delegates knew that they would decide whether the party remained intact or not. While officially the Lavon Affair was not even on the agenda, it hovered over the entire deliberations and all knew that Eshkol's political future was at stake. Ben-Gurion repeated his call for a commission of inquiry, saying that truth and justice must be adhered to. Eshkol put this to a test as confidence in his leadership. From his sickbed, Moshe Sharett was brought to the stage in a wheelchair. Sick with cancer, everyone knew his days were numbered, and

this would be in fact his final public appearance. He now gave full vent to his feelings and called on the party members to rid themselves once and for all from the dictates of one man, as outstanding and distinguished as he might be. At the end of a highly emotional address, he received a kiss on his forehead from Golda. Both did not forget that nine years earlier Ben-Gurion had deposed Sharett and Golda had been a passive observer to this brutal act. Both Sharett and Golda used the opportunity to settle long-standing accounts with Ben-Gurion, each one for a different reason: Sharett for his ouster and the manner in which it was done, and Golda for yielding to Ben-Gurion's dictates and replacing Sharett with no hesitations or moral compunction. She may have been angry that Ben-Gurion preferred Eshkol as his successor in 1963 and did not even give her the courtesy of turning him down.

When she spoke, everyone listened carefully:

The first curse that lay at our doorstep was when people started talking of close associates and those who were not. The meaning of an associate is yes-man. Someone who never argues, who has no other opinion. This phenomenon not only destroyed the great idea in our party, it hurt not only the yes-men, it primarily hurt the honor of the man to whom they said yes, who has close associates. Where associates, stand there can be no comradeship.

At this point she criticized not only Ben-Gurion's younger allies but also herself, who for so many years was one of Ben-Gurion's outstanding obedient servants, certainly when it came to the removal of Sharett. She then commented on Ben-Gurion's recent statement that it was not truth that preceded everything, but the chair (i. e. position) that was above all". Here she was more biting:

I totally reject this statement as though there are two categories of comrades: those who think there should be a commission of inquiry are for the truth, and the chair has no importance at all, and those who think there should be no commission—they trample the truth, looking only at one thing—the chair. This is not an appropriate description of comrades who sit on chairs and those comrades who wish to occupy them.

When it came to the Lavon Affair, she reminded Ben-Gurion that "he did not heed our advice prior to appointing Lavon as defense minister. Have you forgotten, Ben-Gurion, that even before the Nasty Business three comrades came to you and told you all those terrible and harsh things, of which you later heard from Eshkol? Did we hide these things from you? Did we not tell you that the state was endangered"? She then turned to deal with Ben-Gurion's motives for resigning in June 1963:

I have an additional question to you: what, according to your opinion, should the comrades have understood when you announced your resignation and proposed that Eshkol should

become the prime minister? We sat for long evenings and pleaded: don't go, don't do it, and you told us, I have a reason that I cannot divulge to you. You also did not tell us that we must know that you would demand to set up a judicial commission of inquiry. If you had said so, each one of us, certainly Eshkol, would have weighed carefully if he wanted to join the cabinet under such terms. Certainly each one of us would have said "I do not wish to be in the thick of things because I oppose a renewed inquiry, I will not agree to vote for it and I shall not join the cabinet." What riles me most is the demand, in the name of unity and compromise, that the majority not use its right to decide. The party, over its life time, has never recoiled from deciding an issue that caused such a storm and will certainly not do so now.

The final subject to which she devoted much time was the partnership with Achdut Ha'avodah and the need to create a broadbased worker's alignment, something Ben-Gurion was totally opposed to because of Mapai's agreement to abandon the issue of electoral reform. The latter point was not included in her emotional speech in favor of the establishment of such an alignment:

I say here wholeheartedly, exactly as I said at the meeting of the Secretariat that dealt with the formation of the cabinet under Ben-Gurion, when the question arose who we were going to go with, with the Liberals or with Achdut Ha'avodah. Then I raised my hand forgoing with Achdut Ha'avodah instead of the Liberals. I do not regret it. If I have to say again—the Liberals or Achdut Ha'avodah, I will raise both my hands in favor of the Alignment, even if it is not perfect, and I pray that this large party with all its opinions and thoughts, its layers and ages, its will and tendencies, could continue to hold in the future pertinent, occasionally even bitter arguments, but will conduct them as in the past on a solid basis of comradeship.<sup>15</sup>

When the vote was held, Ben-Gurion's proposal to appoint a committee of inquiry gained 841 votes (some 40%), while those opposed numbered 1226 votes (60%). Ben-Gurion was flabbergasted at what he called the "night of the long knives". In his diary, he noted: "The ugliest thing in the convention was a speech full of hate by Golda. I was sad to hear her speak, spouting hatred and venom. From where did this originate and what is its source? Is this new or not?" To a close friend he wrote: "Had I not heard her with my own ears, I would never have believed that she was capable of absorbing and spewing such venom".<sup>16</sup> He could no longer understand nor believe that Golda and Aranne, comrades over decades, whom he had often valued, now abandoned him as though he was a pariah. When his younger allies suggested that he return to the government, he began to consider setting up a new political party ahead of the next Knesset elections due to be held in November 1965. On June 3, 1965, the Mapai Central Committee elected

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<sup>15</sup> Agress, Golda, pp. 122–125.

<sup>16</sup> Bar-Zohar, Ben-Gurion, p. 1579.

Eshkol as its candidate for the office of prime minister by a majority of 63.5%. Ben-Gurion mustered only 36.5% and now read the writing on the wall. He had no other choice but to secede from Mapai or to quit politics altogether. There was a third alternative, namely that he would be expelled from the ranks of the party that he had established and led for over three decades. In those days he started discussing publicly the need to set up a new party that would have electoral reform as its central slogan, thus causing the infusion of new and fresh blood to flow into the political system. Israel appeared to him to be like a well-satisfied and sated body wishing only to live in peace without being constantly buffeted by storms. From this idea rose the seed that eventually led to the creation of Rafi—the Israel Workers List. It was headed by Ben-Gurion, and around him gathered the young Mapai leaders of the past: Shimon Peres, Yitzhak Navon, Teddy Kollek, Gad Ya'acobi, Chaim Herzog and Yosef Almogi. At the last minute, Moshe Dayan also hopped on this wagon. Most of them joined the party out of a sense of personal loyalty to Ben-Gurion, hoping that from a newly acquired position of political strength, they would be able to dictate certain political moves to Eshkol. Most of those who followed Ben-Gurion came from the ranks of senior officials of the Prime Minister's Office and the Ministry of Defense. They knew they lacked a strong financial base, had no party machinery, no party branches, and their chances were slim. Some of them were great experts in predicting election results, mainly Peres and Almogi, and they rightly sensed what was going to happen. But they did not wish to defy Ben-Gurion and on June 29, 1965, Rafi was officially established. It rested essentially on one element: Ben-Gurion's prestige. But even this property was already somewhat tarnished. Ben-Gurion began his final struggle: how to recreate Israel as he imagined it should have been according to his vision. He realized that the revolutionary zeal that had characterized the Yishuv prior to the establishment of the state was slowly disappearing and now there arose an ideology of careerism and "nowism". He felt that Israel was too weak to allow itself to sink into normality and rest on its laurels and achievements in many spheres. What was needed, he proclaimed, was a return to the spirit of pioneering to build a society based on truth, justice and integrity.

Almost like Lenin and Mao Zedong in their time, he preached for the continuation of the Zionist revolution, a sort of an Israeli version of Mao's "Cultural Revolution". He knew that Mapai's leaders were tired of the struggles of the past and wanted some peace and quiet to better deal with the new pressures on Israel and they were more interested in calming down the nation: let the Israelis begin to enjoy some economic prosperity which was the hallmark of a new consumer society. Ben-Gurion failed to understand that the younger generation of Israel was fed up with the struggles of the past and the trite slogans, what was called "Zionism" in inverted commas, and above all everyone wanted to forget about the

Lavon Affair. Few understood the depth of Ben-Gurion's feelings and insistence on the need to rejuvenate Zionism and Israeli society. Many asked was it worth splitting the party over this. The tragedy was that it was Ben-Gurion himself who raised, nurtured and promoted a new generation of both military and civilian bureaucrats who wanted to advance their careers instead of being role models and settling in the arid Negev desert. He called for the return to fundamental Zionism, to the roots of the Zionist-Socialist vision, while his young associates in Rafi, who for years had played central roles in key decisions affecting Israel, spoke of political power, the need to be in the midst of things where central decisions were made, to serve in the government and the Knesset and not in some godforsaken settlement in the Negev, far away from the media. Deep in their hearts, they dreamed of the day when they would be accepted back to the warm bosom of Mapai. But for the time being, they realized, the only way to be elected to the Knesset would be to follow Ben-Gurion, otherwise they would be doomed to remain in the political desert. This they did not wish to experience, even if it was in the name of exalted ideas. To their credit, it must be said that they followed Ben-Gurion in spite of his whims and idiosyncracies. Soon they realized that Mapai was managing quite well without them and that Eshkol gathered around him a group of young aides, many of whom worked with him in the Ministry of Finance and did not have a clear-cut political identity. Among them was Ya'acov Herzog who succeeded Teddy Kollek as director general of the Prime Minister's Office. Kollek decided to run for mayor of Jerusalem, was elected in 1965 and fulfilled that mission with enormous distinction for a quarter of a century. Eshkol also enjoyed the support of the Achdut Ha'avodah leaders headed by Yigal Allon and Yisrael Galili. Ben-Gurion was the only although temporary patron of the former younger Mapai leaders who were eager to return to the center of the political arena.

The Mapai veterans reacted with anger to the establishment of Rafi. Golda felt that the magnificent building called Mapai was about to disintegrate because of its founder himself. Her anger knew no boundaries. She was determined to act against the dissidents. Ben-Gurion and his allies were charged before a party tribunal and called by the prosecutor "a neo-Fascist group led by a leader". How ironic it was that at the end of his days, Ben-Gurion was called a fascist leader by his former comrades—a title that he had for many years reserved for Menachem Begin and even then rarely used it. The party tribunal decided to expel the Rafi candidates from the party. Mapai's elders did all they could to deny Rafi any electoral gain. One way of ensuring their continued rule was to speed up the unity with Achdut Ha'avodah. That hot summer witnessed the creation of the Alignment, a joint list of Mapai and Achdut Ha'avodah. The price the Mapai leaders were willing to pay was insignificant for them—abandoning any move



designed to promote electoral reform. Those very Mapai leaders who in 1959 tried to sell to the Israeli voter that this was the central issue now went out of their way to demonstrate that it was not so. Even Abba Eban, who in 1959 had quoted such luminaries as Lincoln and Jefferson to support electoral reform, now quoted other sources to demonstrate the opposite.

The Herut leaders watched this drama with astonishment. Begin understood that if he ever intended to win Knesset elections, he would have to enter into a parliamentary alliance with another party in order to form a right-wing alignment. This he did in the summer of 1965 when he created Gachal, the Herut-Liberal bloc, through which he wanted to challenge the new labor alignment. Perhaps he harbored some illusions that he could draw Rafi into Gachal. This nightmare in fact haunted the heads of the labor alignment and may have influenced some of their acts. Over time it became clear that they had a good reason for this fear. In the early 1970's, some Rafi members joined Likud (the new expanded version of Gachal), and the final blow came when Moshe Dayan agreed to serve as foreign minister in Menachem Begin's first cabinet in 1977.

The 1965 Knesset election campaign was one of the ugliest and dirtiest the country had ever known, mostly because of the harsh and personal attacks exchanged between the heads of Mapai and those of Rafi. This was not the finest hour of the Israel labor movement. Principles such as personal friendships, political comradeship, party unity, all were thrown aside as useless tools. The election campaign still hovered partly over the Lavon Affair, but most Israelis were fed up and did not see this issue as something that would provide answers to their immediate needs. This campaign also opened the door to new political forces that would ripen ten years later—inhabitants of development towns in the periphery and the big urban slums. For them, the struggle within the labor movement was esoteric and held no meaning to subjects that interested them—advancement on the social and economic rungs, improving their standard of living and their involvement and integration in the mainstream of Israeli society and politics. Rafi did not really have an answer to these aspirations. The issues utmost on their minds were the Lavon Affair, electoral reform, and security. Mapai's leaders read the new map better, but lacked pertinent populist answers. Gachal had more attractive solutions, but it lacked the political-economic and organizational infrastructure that Mapai had built in thirty years of painstaking work.

The Rafi heads launched a series of attacks on the Eshkol government, charging it with what they called a serious security mishap. Perhaps they meant Eshkol's agreement to visits by American technicians to the Dimona nuclear facility. They conveniently forgot that Ben-Gurion himself had authorized such visits in 1961. Since they could not attack the still-secret 1965 Memorandum of Understanding between Israel and the United States, they preferred to circulate various

rumors regarding mishaps in the defense establishment. They were aided by Isser Harel who was temporarily appointed by Eshkol, at Golda's behest, as special adviser on security and intelligence matters and did all he could to undermine the position of his successor in the Mossad Meir Amit. Harel was forced to resign several months later. The Rafi leaders even accused the Eshkol government of the worsening of ties with France, for them an unforgivable sin. This charge was unfair and incorrect, as De Gaulle had begun to alter the French policy towards Israel in 1959.

As always, Golda played a key role in the makeup of the Alignment's list of candidates for the Knesset and in the campaign itself. She promoted some younger leaders who did not jump ship and join Rafi, removed Ben-Gurion's supporters from the list, ousted former Justice Minister Dov Joseph and replaced him with Yaacov Shimshon Shapira, the chief prosecutor in Ben-Gurion's party trial. She traveled extensively throughout Israel and gave the party a much-needed boost.

The voters' verdict was decisive. The public still wanted to have Ben-Gurion and his allies in the Knesset, but not in the government. Rafi won only ten seats, the Alignment received 45 mandates, Mapam eight. Gachal retained its previous strength—26 seats that had once belonged to Herut and the Liberals. Eshkol won a significant personal victory but at a heavy personal price. Several days after the elections he suffered a heart attack and his close associates began to wonder about his health and therefore the need to seek a successor. Many eyes were looking at Golda. But in those very days, she herself entered Beilinson Hospital for medical checkup due to a slight stroke. Instead her doctors diagnosed that she was suffering from cancer of the lymphatic glands (lymphoma). She swore them to absolute secrecy. Initially there was talk of an operation to remove the cancer, but she preferred to try chemotherapy to halt the spread of the illness. The treatment was successful and the cancer halted. At that time, she also wrote her will, but there was no immediate need for that. She managed to live thirteen more years, smoking two packs of cigarettes a day, all this due to her iron will and capacity to suffer pain without complaining. A strange situation ensued. The two senior leaders of the Alignment were seriously ill, but their maladies were kept secret from the public.

Eshkol recovered and was able to form a cabinet consisting of the Alignment, Mapam, the Independent Liberals and the National Religious Party. When he presented his cabinet to the Knesset, he mustered a parliamentary majority of 75 seats. Ben-Gurion, Dayan, Peres and the other Rafi members moved to the opposition seats, far from the center of action, and could only observe from afar the unfolding events and hurl sterile criticism at the government, mostly in matters pertaining to defense and foreign affairs. Golda could now breathe easier. The split in the party did not seriously undermine Mapai's achievements

(now the senior partner in the Alignment) and did not harm its ability to lead the nation. But the storms of the past decades had exacted a toll on her. She seemed to be wondering what had happened to the great vision. While the labor Alignment was the main political body in Israel, for reasons of political convenience, Eshkol preferred to include in his cabinet the National Religious Party and the Independent Liberals and had to pay a price. There would be no change in the religious status quo: the preservation of the historic partnership with the National Religious Party (Mafdal) was now of great importance for the Alignment. This partnership was to last until 1977, when the leaders of that party decided to throw in their lot with the new leading party—the Likud.

It is not clear when Golda came to the conclusion that it was time to leave the cabinet. Her resignations were already well-known, although she never implemented them. At the end of 1965, it appeared as though the wind had gone out of her sails, even as she was wielding enormous political influence. Eshkol made no major move without consulting her. True, he was the prime minister and thus the senior, but unofficially she was the most dominant and authoritative figure in the Alignment. Perhaps she assumed that Israel would not be facing any major dramatic military and political upheavals for the next five years. This was the assessment of the Israel intelligence community whose national estimate consistently claimed that war, if it broke out, would take place no earlier than 1970 or 1971, much of it due to the Egyptian military involvement in the civil war in Yemen, an involvement that included some 60,000 Egyptian soldiers in that country. The major powers did not make any great demands on Israel to undertake territorial concessions or accept refugees back, the pressure on Dimona abated for the time being. The United States slowly became Israel's major arms supplier. Franco-Israeli relations as well as Israeli-German relations appeared to be on an even keel. This time, she may have thought, Eban could handle Israel's foreign relations well.

When she announced her wish not to be included in the new cabinet, there were no delegations or individual leaders pleading with her to change her mind. At age 67, it seemed as though Golda was worthy of retirement. Indeed, her retirement was not accompanied by a sense of bitterness, but neither with much glee. It appeared as though Eshkol himself was happy to see her go. She may have become too dominant to his taste. He now felt himself strong and self-assured and no longer required her help or guidance. In any case, she would remain in the Knesset, always available to give advice if necessary. Eshkol functioned well with the help of Galili and Allon, Sapir, Aranne, and Eban. If his attitude hurt her, she never said so publicly nor even to her inner circle of friends. Privately, Eshkol started calling her in Yiddish “Die Malke” (the queen). When he was critical, he called her “Klafte” (the shrew), and when angry, he called her “Die Machsheifa”

(the witch). Outwardly, he behaved like a perfect gentleman. He offered her the post of deputy prime minister which, as expected, she turned down, saying: “I prefer to be a full-time grandmother rather than a part-time minister”. She may have been insulted that such an idea even occurred to Eshkol. Both knew the post of deputy prime minister was empty and devoid of all influence. She may have recalled the two ministers who held that position, Kaplan because of terminal illness and Eban for the sake of political convenience. She did not wish to be like them. However, she did tell her friends that she had no intention to enter a political convent, she would continue to be around, but for the time being she wished to recharge her emotional batteries that were depleted in the long struggle against Ben-Gurion. In the depth of her heart she knew that she had been party to the removal of this great man, the one to whom she personally owed so much. This gave her no rest. Politics is a cruel game, and Israeli politics are no different, perhaps even more so because of the size of the country, the nature of the population and the many views and opinions, many of them highly emotionally charged ideologies. But to her last day she was convinced that Ben-Gurion had to go, for his own sake and the sake of the nation and people. She felt he had embarked on a destructive path and someone had to rescue Israel, Mapai and Ben-Gurion himself from his many obsessions. Perhaps she was still angry that Ben-Gurion did not propose her as his successor in 1963. There is ground to believe that he proposed Eshkol thinking he could handle him and even destroy him as he did to Sharett. Golda was made of a different and stronger mettle. She was a much tougher and dominant personality than Eshkol and Ben-Gurion may have understood that he would not be able to force on her certain moves from afar. He may have even toyed with the idea that again there would be two governments in Israel: a *de jure* government in Jerusalem and a *de facto* government in Sede Boker headed by Ben-Gurion. Eshkol might have learned how to live with this, but not Golda. Ben-Gurion probably knew her senses of guilt concerning her role in his removal. A few years later, on January 29, 1969, he sent her a letter explaining the reason for his resignation:

I resigned from the government in June 1963 not because of defects in the party but because I came to the final conclusion that thirty years of public service in my age is enough: fifteen years in the Zionist Executive and fifteen years in the State of Israel, and I decided irrevocably to leave all political positions and write the history of the state that I think starts with the establishment of the first school of agriculture in Mikve Israel in 1879, up to the state’s twentieth year. More than once I explained that the revival of the state did not begin on May 14, 1948, and did not end on that day. I feel the need to tell the youth what and who brought about the establishment of the state and what was needed to bring it to perfection if that is at all possible. I was not sure the years left to me would suffice to finish this literary work in which I am now engaged. But as a Jew and as a citizen of the state I am not at liberty not

to worry about the future of the state. Out of this concern I write to you, whether you hear my words or not, it is my duty which I shall perform. One of the reasons for my resignation was that I did not want that one man be identified with the state, and I suggested Eshkol in my place.<sup>17</sup>

When Levi Eshkol presented his new cabinet to the Knesset on January 12, 1966, Golda was still at her usual seat at the cabinet table. The minute Eban swore allegiance as foreign minister, she arose from her seat, congratulated him warmly and moved to take her place in the front row of the Alignment seats. She was elected to the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee, attended the Knesset sessions regularly and on occasion even spoke. She returned her official car, vacated her residence on Balfour Street in Jerusalem and settled in her home in Ramat Aviv. The transfer of the job to Eban was much simpler than the transfer from Sharett to her ten years earlier. Eban did not have to learn the many intricacies of Israel's foreign policy, he already knew them well. As was the custom, there were lunches and dinners tended in her honor by the Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee, the Editors Committee and the General Staff. In her remarks she hinted broadly: I have not yet ended my political life. Few thought at the time that she really meant it. The public assumed that she had now become a pensioner and respected her desire for privacy. This time, she decided, she would indeed live a more serene and orderly life. She would divide her time between the Knesset in Jerusalem, her home in Tel Aviv and weekends in Revivim. She would go to the theater, attend concerts and parties. She would read books and see her close friends without a murderous schedule and ministerial responsibility. The rest did her well: when a delegation arrived at her door step asking if she would be willing to consider accepting a new responsibility, that of secretary general of Mapai, she was more than ready to heed the call.

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<sup>17</sup> Letter from Ben-Gurion to Golda Meir, 29 January 1969, in Ben-Gurion Archive.

## 15 The Secretary General (1966–1968)

Retirement was not for her. This stark reality dawned on Golda as soon after she left the Foreign Ministry. Having made no plans for her retirement, she assumed that life would be easier, less hectic and demanding, above all without the heavy responsibility she had borne for so many years. Yet she made sure she did not cut herself completely off from politics. She continued to serve in the Knesset and was a leading member of its Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee, together with Ben-Gurion, Dayan and Peres. She was still a full-fledged member of Mapai's governing institutions, the Political Committee and the Secretariat of the party, and also was a member of the Alignment's Council. Not quitting the Knesset was her way of signalling to her friends not to count her out of politics. She was still around and available for higher office. Meanwhile, in early 1966 she enjoyed her new relative leisure which meant no murderous schedule, receiving official visitors, reading stacks of cables, making decisions and attending cabinet sessions. She decided which Knesset meetings she would attend and spent much time with her children and grandchildren, traveled regularly to Revivim on weekends and spent more time in her apartment on the kibbutz. But pretty soon it became obvious to her that she could not get used to life without public service. Since 1928, she had been used to getting up in the morning and going to an office. It was hard to shed off habits acquired over four decades. Since she did not give up politics, some party veterans decided to come up with a new and tempting idea. They knew that deep in her heart she had not yet come to terms with the split in Mapai and above all with the absence of Ben-Gurion from center stage. In those days she said: "Ben-Gurion is an outstanding personality. Irrespective of what happened and what will happen, he is the greatest personality of the generation. Arguments and history apart, even Ben-Gurion will not succeed in spoiling for me Ben-Gurion."<sup>1</sup> There was a last-minute attempt to heal the rift with Rafi. In early 1966, she met with Ben-Gurion at the "King David" Hotel in Jerusalem. He demanded that she would publically declare that Eshkol had lied in the Lavon Affair, a suggestion she resolutely turned down, which only deepened Ben-Gurion's sensibilities and strengthened his conviction that she, too, was part and perhaps even the leader of the corrupt cabal that now stood at the helm of Mapai. The reconciliation attempt failed. From then on they barely met, and when they did run into each other in the Knesset, the atmosphere was decidedly chilly.

She was not surprised when emissaries arrived at her home to propose that she take the post of secretary general of the party. Mapai had not yet recovered

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<sup>1</sup> Agress, Golda, p. 125.

from the shock of the recent split, the Lavon Affair and the acrimonious election campaign that left a bitter taste notwithstanding the Alignment's victory. She and other party veterans could not bear the sight of Ben-Gurion and his young associates sitting in the opposition benches in the Knesset, "almost like Begin and his gang", she once muttered. It was indeed a strange sight. Here was Ben-Gurion, the founding father, Moshe Dayan, the hero of the 1956 Sinai War, Shimon Peres who armed Israel and was responsible for building Dimona and Israel's aviation and arms industry, together with Navon and Almogi and five lesser-known figures, huddling in the political desert trying to make life miserable for the Eshkol government. The task was not that difficult because in late 1965 and early 1966, the government decided to cool off the over-heated economy and undertook severe deflationary measures. The era characterized by a vast momentum of economic growth was about to end. Many large-scale projects such as the port of Ashdod, the Knesset Building, the Israel Museum, the National Water Carrier, the Hadera Electric Plant, the Dimona Nuclear Facility, and the Givat Ram campus of the Hebrew University were completed, as was the government center not far from there, throwing large number of workers out of work. Deflation meant a massive cutback in the state budget, further exacerbating unemployment that in early 1967 reached some 100,000 or ten percent of the work force in Israel. The mood in the country was as bleak as the economy. 1966 was a year of dwindling immigration (less than 13,000) and growing emigration, there was a sense of disenchantment in the air. It seemed as though the heroic epoch of Israel had come to its end and some of the central actors left center stage. Golda too was seen as though she was in semi-retirement. The government's performance was less than brilliant, its leader popular but far from charismatic. Eshkol exuded optimism but could not infect others with his mood. Golda was not in the cabinet and the country felt the absence of strong, experienced and steady hands at the helm.

However, when it came to defense, there was a better feeling. Chief of Staff Yitzhak Rabin succeeded in providing a strong and steady leadership. However, he too was confronted with a new reality, that of the establishment of the Palestine Liberation Organization in May 1964. This body carried out its first act of terror against Israel on January 1, 1965. The beginning of PLO terror acts from across the Lebanese and Jordanian borders led the IDF to resume its policy of retaliation, which as in the past did not solve the problem but intensified the vicious cycle which further radicalized the Arab-Israel conflict. Border incidents were now a daily occurrence and the public sensed that the government's failure to provide a suitable response fuelled Rafi and Gachal's claim that the government was failing to protect the country. Rafi's leaders still had much weight when it came to defense matters. Among their Knesset members were a former prime minister and defense minister, a deputy defense minister and two former chiefs

of staff (Dayan and Tsur), so it was assumed they knew what they were talking about. They also knew, but refused to acknowledge, that Eshkol was now in the midst of obtaining vast amounts of offensive weapons from the United States that included “Skyhawk” jet fighters, “Hawk” ground-to-air missiles that arrived in the fall of 1964 and hundreds of Patton tanks. Under Eshkol’s and Rabin’s leadership, as well as the regional commanders, the IDF was daily becoming stronger and more efficient. The United States was slowly about to become Israel’s major arms supplier. The Rafi leaders preferred to undermine the public confidence in Eshkol’s government, thereby adding to the general malaise. Eshkol could never adopt Ben-Gurion’s style, but being a solid administrator, he quietly prepared the IDF for the next war, whenever it would come.

In the realm of foreign affairs, Eban, who now ran Israel’s foreign relations with minimal interference on the part of the prime minister, chose to pursue a policy of low profile, seeking some sort of co-existence with the neighboring countries, not overly stressing Israel’s image as the region’s leading military power. He sought to improve ties with the United States and even looked for ways to find a common basis for discussions with the Soviet Union, although the latter allied itself solidly behind Egypt and Syria. He also tried to save what could have been salvaged of the historic Franco-Israeli alliance. There was nothing dramatic in these moves and they gave the impression of treading water. Occasionally, Eban would come up with an interesting formula such as the one he coined after India and Pakistan ended their 1965 war with a peace treaty mediated by the Russians that was signed in Tashkent. Eban called for the introduction of the “Spirit of Tashkent” to the Middle East and invited the Russians to play a greater role in promoting Arab-Israel negotiations and even proposed that the Soviet Union mediate between them, a similar role to the one it had played in Tashkent. The United States expressed unhappiness with Israel’s idea of giving the Soviet Union a greater role in the Middle East. But the Americans did not have to worry. Russia was openly nonreceptive to the idea. By then it had entrenched itself in Egypt and in Syria— why give up such an ace. Dayan was openly critical of these moves. In an October 1966 debate in the Knesset, he challenged the need to improve ties with the Russians citing massive Russian arms shipments flowing to Egypt and Syria. Golda replied: “It is not our fault that we failed in the past—and I hope we shall succeed in the future—to reach an understanding with the Soviet Union. I shall bless each action and statement of any foreign minister who will seek any crack, even the tiniest, to deepen greater understanding with this giant”. The Israel intelligence community insisted on its assessments that at this point Israel did not face the danger of war, partly because of Egypt’s military involvement in the war in Yemen and mainly because of the perennial split in the Arab world. Eshkol allowed Eban to pursue his diplomatic initiatives while making sure the IDF gets what it wanted and needed. The IDF was telling Eshkol that the



Arabs were not ready for war and if war came, it would happen at the earliest in 1970 or 1971. The IDF was effectively being told that it had time.

There was a sense of restlessness in domestic politics, a feeling of loss of direction and purpose, lack of strong and authoritative leadership, also a sense of fatigue after the harrowing and dramatic days of the Lavon Affair and the split in Mapai. There was an immediate need to resuscitate the tired party's institutions. The performance of Reuven Barkat, the luckcluster secretary general of the party, was mediocre. Sapir, Eshkol and Aranne felt that Golda's authority and strength were now required to rebuild the party and heal its wounds. She could find no cogent argument to justify refusing the job. Her health was good, the cancer in remission. She obeyed her doctor's orders, lived a more orderly life with less tension. But as she could not give up smoking, so she craved to get back to the arena where decisions were made. According to the accepted ritual, at first she refused, but pressures were exerted and more delegations arrived at her doorstep. Finally she relented and agreed to serve for a limited time—all this charade was in the best Mapai tradition.

When she assumed the position in February 1966 and arrived in her new office on 110 Hayarkon Street in Tel Aviv, she realized she could do with the party whatever she wanted. Mapai yearned for strong leadership and a steady hand. Although it was still licking the wounds from recent events, it still had some vitality left. The split with Rafi was felt mainly at the party branches in Israel's periphery and in the development towns where Ben-Gurion was still seen as the national hero and father of the nation. Golda assumed that if she could revive the party's moribund institutions and restore the public's trust in the party and its leaders, Mapai would be able to revive itself as the leading political force in the country. Golda's organizational skills came in handy and with the help of loyal aides she made sure that the party leaders in the government and the Histadrut would coordinate their moves in an orderly process. She regularly met with Eshkol and was involved in all state matters. Soon an interesting situation developed which resembled the Soviet Union more than Israel: The secretary general of the party wielded far more influence and authority on key matters than the prime minister.

However, when it came to security issues, Golda had difficulties advising Eshkol. As terror incidents multiplied mainly on the northern borders of Israel, and as incidents fanned by the Syrians ensconced on the Golan Heights grew in intensity, Eshkol found himself under mounting pressure from the IDF to 'do something' to prevent the deterioration. At times, the atmosphere heated, and when demands were made for retaliatory raids, Eshkol tended to look for Rafi's fingers behind these demands that he rightly thought were aimed to discredit him. In the Knesset plenary and especially in its Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee, Rafi

leaders continued to criticize the government and its head for what they charged was impotence and severe security lapses that were never really proven. To maintain public morale, Eshkol authorized a number of retaliatory raids across the Lebanese and Jordanian borders. But even these acts did not stem the criticism or the incidents and created new tensions with Washington. There was a feeling that Israel was sliding back to the pre-Sinai war days, this time without Ben-Gurion and Dayan at the helm. A large-scale retaliation raid in the village of Samu in the Hebron Mountains in November 1966 caused many Jordanian casualties and angered Washington and London who tried their best to bolster King Hussein's standing, while realizing that Eshkol's standing in Israel also had to be preserved. They failed in all these efforts. In the summer of 1966, a delegation of four young Mapai leaders appeared in Golda's office demanding the removal of Eshkol from his post as prime minister because of a security lapse that was hinted to by Isser Harel. It was noted that the latter, then serving as Eshkol's security adviser, tried to smear General Meir Amit, his successor as head of the Mossad. Golda's visitors did not specify exactly what Eshkol was guilty of. Their demand was that Golda replace Eshkol as prime minister. Her reply was terse: "You have spoken to me about the matter raised by Isser Harel. You have touched upon serious matters. There is nothing to speak of the premiership. There is no justification to harm Eshkol's standing. I shall lie here and not agree to any attack on him".<sup>2</sup> However, she did not go out of her way to defend Eshkol, nor did she praise his talents and achievements. For her, the removal of Eshkol would have confirmed all the charges leveled at him by Ben-Gurion and his associates. She would never hurt Eshkol, even if it meant that she did not become prime minister. She did not want to reach the top by climbing over Eshkol's deceased body. She was still haunted by the memories of the manner in which she had succeeded Sharett.

In October 1966, Chief of Staff Rabin granted an interview to the IDF weekly "Bamachane" in which he in effect called for a military operation to topple the Syrian regime. Perhaps he reflected the mood of the senior IDF officers, but certainly not the policy of the government. Eshkol reprimanded him privately, but this did not solve the problem: The Palestine Liberation Organization and even more so the Soviet Union were determined to bring about hostilities between Israel and the Arab states. One way to do so was to act against Israel, provoking that country to engage in large-scale retaliation that would escalate, pulling into the fray Syria and Egypt in a major war, if only to salvage their honor. The PLO

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<sup>2</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 125; see also Moshe Gilboa, *Six Years—Six Days*, Tel Aviv, 1968, p. 174. Several months earlier, a group of activists came to see her and asked for the removal of Eshkol and Meir Amit because of the Ben Barka Affair. She vehemently rejected the idea, seeing it as a Rafi ploy.

was supported by Syria, which was seen as a Soviet satellite. Nasser preferred to delay the third round against Israel to an indefinite date—not before he united the Arab world under his leadership and prepared it for war at the time and place of his choosing. Israel’s leaders found themselves in an untenable situation. They did not seek war, knowing it would not resolve the basic issues of the Arab-Israel conflict. But no Israeli government could stand by idly and permit its citizens to be fired at. Eshkol could not appear hesitant when it came to defense, as the Rafi leaders were constantly breathing down his neck.

The early months of 1967 witnessed a rapid deterioration that resembled a Greek tragedy, inevitably leading to the Six Days War. Tension mounted steadily, mostly along the Israel-Syria Armistice Demarcation Line. In January 1967 alone, 23 incidents occurred. Diplomatic attempts to restore calm through the resumption of the meetings of the Israel-Syria Mixed Armistice Commission failed. Syria demanded a discussion on the issue of the status of the demilitarized zones. Israel demanded an urgent discussion on the current tension. The meetings failed to reduce the tension. Attacks mounted and Israel turned to the United Nations Security Council. Between July 1966 and May 1967, Israel submitted 34 complaints on Syrian aggression. Syria could always rely on a Soviet veto that would prevent the adoption of a pro-Israel resolution in that body.

Golda felt that a major crisis was at hand. On January 6, 1967, she attended a meeting of the heads of European Socialist parties in Rome, where she spoke of the looming crisis in the Middle East. Perhaps her sharp instincts told her that the region was on the verge of war. She was not mistaken. Russia continued to fan the flames of war and claimed that Israel was planning an attack against the revolutionary regime of “our Syrian brethren”. Israel strongly denied these accusations but the tension did not abate. Israel’s leaders did not and could not remain silent. On March 24, 1967, Rabin declared that the “solution to this problem contains a number of measures: political, military and defensive. We must respond towards that country from where these infiltrators come”.<sup>3</sup> On April 1, as the security situation along the northern border further worsened, Eshkol stated in a cabinet meeting that he viewed the recent attacks very seriously. On April 5, Eban stated in the Knesset that “the Government of Israel will undertake all necessary measures to protect its territory and the lives of its citizens”.<sup>4</sup> The most serious incident since the Sinai War took place on April 7, 1967: Israeli fighter jets shot down in broad daylight six Russian-made Syrian MIGs, some of them over Damascus. That was in response to a heavy Syrian shelling by tanks and artillery of Israeli

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<sup>3</sup> Ha’aretz, 25 March 1967.

<sup>4</sup> Statement in the Knesset, 5 April 1967.

settlements in the Hula Valley. The incident alarmed not only Eshkol, but also Ben-Gurion. The latter told his close associates that Israel had embarked on a road leading to war without assuring the support of at least one major power and against the wrong enemy. Ben-Gurion saw the downing of the Syrian jets as a serious error that could arouse negative reactions in the Soviet Union and in other capitals. The Russians were alarmed, and so was President De Gaulle. It was obvious that the Russians could not exercise self-restraint in view of such a devastating blow dealt to their Syrian clients.

The ones who finally moved the wheels towards war were the Russians. A Soviet parliamentary delegation that visited Cairo on May 13 told Nasser that they had information that Israel was amassing a vast army along its border with Syria and was about to launch an attack on the Golan Heights. The Egyptian president interpreted this as a Russian green light to attack Israel. In view of this Russian warning, Nasser made a historic decision: he would change his entire strategy and timetable. This time, he estimated, he had the backing of a superpower, while Israel was alone, exactly the opposite of what happened in 1956. In that case, why shouldn't he determine the flow of events and reserve for Egypt the factor of surprise? By doing so, he would give a crushing answer to his critics in the Arab world who accused him of timidly hiding behind the aprons of the United Nations Emergency Force. The drums of war began to be sounded in the streets of Cairo and Damascus.

On May 12, on the eve of Israel's 19<sup>th</sup> Independence Day, a public meeting was organized for the prime minister by the government's domestic Information Center. Few wanted to hear about Israel's glowing achievements. The majority wanted to know what Israel was planning to do in the face of the intensifying Arab aggression. Eshkol declared: "In view of the 14 sabotage and infiltration incidents that occurred in the last month alone, Israel will not have an alternative but to undertake appropriate counter measures against the focus of the saboteurs and those who help them".<sup>5</sup> From her office in Mapai headquarters in Tel Aviv, Golda watched the events with growing concern. Being a "hawk" by nature, she realized Israel could no longer ignore these alarming developments. At stake was, among many other things, the morale of the Israeli population, mainly in the northern part of the country. Israel was seen as a weak, indecisive and hesitant country. What happened to the IDF deterrent force, she wondered. Such a negative image had serious repercussions on the ruling party. It was impossible not to react, but how and in what dimensions? She knew that unlike 1956, Israel was now alone with no partners and if it launched a preventive war, it would be held responsible

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5 Gilboa, *Six Years—Six Days*, p. 98.

for such a drastic act. Outwardly, she supported the government's policy which she knew well, as she was being fully briefed by Galili on the various diplomatic moves undertaken by Eshkol and Eban. Being a member of the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee, she also heard the briefings given to that body. She also had her own channels for reaching the IDF intelligence branch. Soon she realized that she would, for the time being, have to forget about concentrating on dealing with the party's problems and focus on the new situation that was created. Israel now faced one of the most serious tests in its short history.

On May 14, she traveled to Jerusalem to view the IDF mini-Independence Day parade held in the stadium of the Hebrew University campus on Givat Ram. It was a small parade dictated by the limitations provided in the Israel-Jordan Armistice Agreement, there were no tanks or artillery. On that day, Nasser made his opening move: in broad daylight, Egyptian army units began to move through Cairo towards the Suez Canal and from there in the direction of the Sinai Peninsula. Millions of Egyptians cheered them along the way. Arab radio stations understood the hint and went into a frenzy, thus further arousing the already inflamed Arab public opinion. Two days later, Radio Cairo declared: "The existence of the state of Israel has lasted too long. We welcome the Israeli aggression; we welcome the battle for which we have waited a long time. The great hour has arrived. The battle in which we shall destroy Israel has come".

During the first three days following the Egyptian army movement towards Sinai, Eshkol, Eban and "military sources" in Israel did their best to allay the growing fear in the Israeli public. Initially, they claimed that the troop movements were of a demonstrative nature designed to show solidarity with Syria. Once this effect was achieved, they assumed, they would return to their bases. This was also the estimate of the American intelligence community. But the evaluators apparently did not fully understand Nasser's psychology. Vastly encouraged by Israel's slow and hesitant response, he made another move, this time bolder than the first: on May 16, he demanded that the United Nations Secretary General order the evacuation of the United Nations Emergency Force from the Gaza Strip and Sharm el-Sheikh. The UN Secretary General U Thant made a fatal mistake. He asked Nasser if he meant the withdrawal of UNEF from all of Sinai or just from the Strip and the Straits of Tiran. Nasser, using this golden opportunity, demanded the total withdrawal of the entire force, a move that was executed rapidly. On May 19, at 4 pm, UNEF ceased to act as a buffer between Israel and Egypt. A day earlier Golda assessed that this would lead to war.<sup>6</sup> By May 19, Nasser had violated

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<sup>6</sup> On May 18, 1967, she warned in an Alignment faction meeting that the war was closer than anticipated. Brecher, *Foreign Policy System of Israel*, p. 367.

two of the three arrangements of March 1957 that Golda had been so involved in formulating as foreign minister. By now Nasser had filled up Sinai with some 100,000 troops, close to 800 tanks, 900 pieces of artillery and, above all, he had also successfully evicted UNEF. Now he had no option but to re-impose the naval blockade on the Straits of Tiran and wait to see how Israel would respond. Golda, who knew virtually every word in the arrangements entered into a decade earlier, felt a great deal of responsibility. Israel finally woke up. The IDF began to call up reservists, opened the emergency stores, and placed the troops on high alert along the borders with Egypt and Syria. The newly mobilized units began to drill. Thus began a period known in Israeli history as the “Konenut” (readiness), the three weeks of waiting for the war to begin. Eban began to hold intensive contacts with the United States to ensure that America, which was mostly responsible for the 1957 arrangements, understood the gravity of the situation.

On May 22, Eshkol addressed the Knesset at the opening of its summer session and attempted to reduce the mounting tension. He called on the superpowers to persuade the Arabs to abandon the road to war. He declared that Israel had no intention to attack them and would in no way intervene in their domestic affairs. But he also issued a clear warning: “The IDF is today fully capable of handling any test with the same devotion, talent and capacity that it displayed more than once in the past, and from knowing the situation, we can say: even more so”.<sup>7</sup>

The next day, Nasser announced the reimposition of the naval blockade on ships carrying strategic cargo to Israel, including oil from Iran. Eshkol was informed of this move in the early hours of the morning and understood that this meant a declaration of war. Several hours later, he declared in a Knesset plenary that “any interference with freedom of navigation in the Gulf and the Straits is a major violation of international law, a blow to the sovereign rights of other nations and an act of aggression”.<sup>8</sup> There was no need for further elaboration. He essentially meant that Israel would not wait forever. On that day, May 23, 1967, Golda was invited to attend a meeting at the Prime Minister’s Office. Other invitees were Menachem Begin, Aryeh Ben Eliezer, Chaim Landau, Yosef Serlin and Elimelech Rimalt of Gachal, Shimon Peres, Moshe Dayan and Yosef Almogi representing Rafi. She, David Hacohen and Shaul Avigur represented the Alignment. Yigal Allon was in those very days on an official visit to the Soviet Union. Eshkol reported to them the latest developments and Israel’s dilemma—how and when to respond and should Israel attempt diplomatic moves before launching a preemptive strike. He mentioned the possibility raised by the United States of

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<sup>7</sup> Statement in the Knesset, 22 May 1967.

<sup>8</sup> Statement in the Knesset, 23 May 1967.

Israeli ships in the Straits of Tiran being escorted by American destroyers. Golda vigorously objected saying either there is freedom of navigation or there is none.

From the start of the crisis, the heads of Rafi had begun to circulate broad hints that Eshkol's government bore partial responsibility for what happened and its mistakes only whetted the Arab's appetite to embark on moves that placed Israel in an untenable situation, with no allies and prevented from responding quickly. The longer Israel waited, the higher the human cost would be. Rafi's position did not calm the alarmed Israeli public and only added to the general confusion. The Israeli public was slowly being readied for war: air raid shelters were opened and cleaned, communication trenches and defense moats were dug, civil-defense organizations began to hold exercises. Public parks in Tel Aviv were consecrated to serve as temporary burial sites. Public opinion now became frightened: the transition from relative calm to major emergency was too fast. No one was prepared for what was happening. The leadership failed to instill a sense of security or to provide a feeling that things were under control. On the contrary, the chief of staff realized that the political echelon was wavering. He went to consult with Ben-Gurion. The aging leader advised him in no uncertain terms to avoid war at all costs, fold up the tents and wait for a more suitable opportunity to launch a war, only after Israel would have secured a major power as an ally. Ben-Gurion was thinking in terms of 1956. He had lost contact with the 1967 reality and probably was not that aware of the new IDF and its war plans that were being honed. After seeing Ben-Gurion, Rabin asked for a meeting with Golda. She had no doubt that the IDF would defeat the Arabs, but expressed much concern about the price that would be exacted. However, unlike Ben-Gurion, she encouraged him to do the right thing. Having heard these two contradictory assessments, Rabin had a nervous breakdown and went home for a brief rest. The public was told that he was suffering from nicotine poisoning. More than anyone else he felt that he was now responsible for the situation Israel found itself in. He later explained that he failed to get clear guidance from Eshkol, Ben-Gurion and Golda who expressed contradictory views, the generals were chafing to launch an attack and the civilian echelon, meaning the cabinet, was hesitant. After a two-days rest, Rabin went back to work.

From May 23, public criticism of the Eshkol government intensified. Unlike the Sinai War, which was conducted in strict secrecy, this time tens of thousands of reserve soldiers were called up and posted along the borders of Israel, anxiously waiting, together with their families, for the government to make up its mind. The cabinet held marathon meetings but failed to reach a decisive conclusion. The IDF General Staff recommended an immediate preemptive strike. Eban and the Foreign Ministry diplomats thought that at best Israel would be given 72 hours to fight and finally, even if it wins the battle, it would lose the political

struggle and be forced to withdraw to the starting line. Eban too, was thinking in terms of the 1956 scenario being repeated. He therefore proposed an additional waiting period to enable Israel to determine what would be the intentions of the powers. In view of this critical dilemma, Eshkol felt bound to involve the heads of the opposition parties in the decision making process, namely Gachal and Rafi, so that they would share the unbearable responsibility resting on the government.

On May 24, in a discussion at the Prime Minister's Office, which included Golda Meir, a proposal was made to send a senior Israeli personality to Washington to meet with President Johnson in order to make him aware of the gravity of the situation and remind him of the "assumptions and expectations" under which Israeli had withdrawn from Sinai and Gaza in 1957. Eshkol thought Golda should undertake this mission as she was directly involved in the diplomacy that ended the Sinai war. Since she was not a cabinet member, no one would think that the United States was colluding with Israel against Egypt. Eban was deeply hurt and hinted that if he was not the emissary, he would resign.<sup>9</sup> He claimed, with much justification, that he too had been deeply involved in the 1957 moves, perhaps even deeper than Golda Meir, and he had in his possession the relevant documents that contained the American commitments to ensure freedom of navigation in the Straits of Tiran. Some of the documents were originals and included corrections in Dulles's handwriting. Above all, he reported, the Israeli ambassador in Paris managed to arrange for him to see President De Gaulle. Eshkol, convinced that Golda was more suitable to undertake this mission and would be far more assertive and convincing than Eban, feared another cabinet crisis that would ensue if Eban would resign. It was decided that Eban would travel. His trip would give Israel additional time to make more military preparations. Later Golda justified Eban's trip when she said:

Eban's conversations clarified the situation in Europe and paved the way to cooperation between Israel and the United States, in spite of the fact that Israel did not fully comply with everything America wanted. There is a difference between diplomatic activity at the level of ambassador and that of major source such as a member of the Israel government who expresses its views to the Americans and their president. Could we have attained a better situation had Eban not gone? I would have loved to hear what criticism would be leveled at us had he not gone.<sup>10</sup>

Eban flew to Paris, London and Washington, and it was obvious that as long as he was away pursuing a diplomatic solution, Israel would not launch a preemptive strike. In a discussion held on May 25, Rabin made it clear to the participants that

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<sup>9</sup> Rabin, *Service Book*, p. 155; Gilboa, *Six Years—Six Days*, p. 130.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 130–132.



“what was at stake was Israel’s credibility, determination, her capacity to withstand pressures and her ability to realize her right to self defense, and not only the issue of freedom of navigation”.<sup>11</sup>

During Eban’s absence, more voices were heard calling for the broadening of the government to include additional personalities. Eshkol had already made the first step when he invited the leaders of the opposition to attend some deliberations. Various ideas were floated, among them replacing Eshkol by Ben-Gurion, or at least that Eshkol should give up the defense portfolio. The Israeli media was rife with reports planted by supporters of Rafi, Gachal and the National Religious Party. The first two had good foundations to demand a change in positions in the cabinet and they did their best to incite public opinion. Their ideas fell on open ears: the Israeli public realized that ten days had elapsed since 100,000 Egyptian soldiers had entered Sinai, UNEF was expelled and the Straits of Tiran were blocked again, while the Israeli cabinet had not yet found the proper response. Israel did not yet have television broadcasts, but there was enough hysterical noise emanating from radio broadcasts originating in Arab capitals to make sure that anyone who bothered to listen knew that Nasser had once again become the hero of the Arab world and now courted King Hussein to persuade him to join the Arab campaign to annihilate Israel. If Hussein joined, it was realized, Israel would have to fight on three fronts, something it had not done since 1948. The Israeli public understood that Eban was attempting to obtain the support of a major world power to bring about the withdrawal of the Egyptian troops from Sinai without the necessity to embark on a war. But there was also much concern that the powers might try to shackle Israel’s hands and if compelled to launch a war Israel would be doing so on her own responsibility with all that it could entail after the war. With the background of the lack of certainty regarding the intentions of the government that seemed to be wavering, the demands for expanding the cabinet grew and those who sought this act thought they were committing something highly patriotic. The general view was that this was not the time for narrow political bickering and that the leaders must rise over minute political differences and considerations.

In an attempt to stem the moves towards the broadening of the cabinet’s base, Mapai’s Secretariat met on May 25, 1967, and Secretary General Golda Meir read the proposed resolution:

In these days of emergency that are being experienced by the nation and people, Mapai Secretariat strengthens the hands of the cabinet, the prime minister and defense minister and expresses its confidence in their leadership capability and solid stand in view of the

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<sup>11</sup> Rabin, Service Book, p. 154.

grave situation, and stands with them together with the entire nation. The Secretariat notes with satisfaction the measures taken by the prime minister and defense minister to co-opt representatives of the opposition parties in discussions on the security affairs of the state.

This came at the end of a stormy meeting of the Secretariat that focused on the call for expanding the cabinet. Golda was adamantly opposed to any change and said that not only was it unnecessary but very harmful. She viewed this as a vote of nonconfidence in Eshkol, she said:

Two days ago the prime minister invited on his own representatives of the two largest opposition parties—Gachal and Rafi. He wants to involve them in discussions on current events. But the country is full of rumors not over this, the item most mentioned is additions and changes in the state's leadership, and I wish to make a proposal that its contents should be that the party sees the cabinet as it is constituted now as the authorized cabinet to run the affairs of the state at this time. The party recommends co-opting opposition figures on a permanent basis. The aim is not to make changes in the cabinet, in no form or way. No changes and no additions. Only to co-opt figures from the opposition in discussions on the problems the people and country face today.<sup>12</sup>

Aranne and Sapir supported her position. But other Mapai leaders, especially Haifa's mayor Abba Hushi, demanded that Eshkol consider establishing a government of national unity and add Dayan and Begin to it. Others spoke of the idea of appointing Yigal Allon as defense minister. At this stage, Golda's position that there should be no change was accepted by the Secretariat. But the next day, when the media published details of what had transpired in the meeting, a storm erupted. Golda was seen as the symbol of opposing any change and leaving the seemingly weak leadership in its place, and all this against the wishes of the people. It was never made clear what the public wishes were, who decided for the public and how or who represented the public, but it became evident that Golda failed to understand that there was a need for some change, even a demonstrative change, to appease those who called for it. Her popularity sunk dramatically. Editorials accused her of "destructive political fanaticism". She knew well that at the same time Rafi and Gachal were holding frantic discussions aimed at expanding the cabinet and someone even raised the idea that Ben-Gurion should be asked to return as prime minister, but he rejected the idea. On May 27, the Alignment leadership decided to offer Gachal to join the cabinet as full-fledged member. The proposal was made to Begin by Galili, Barkat and Golda. Gachal was ready to accept only if Rafi would also be invited and stressed the need to bring Moshe Dayan to the cabinet. This meant that sooner or later Eshkol would

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<sup>12</sup> Ben-Gurion, *The State of Israel Renewed*, Vol. II, p. 806.

have to give up the Defense Ministry. Golda was highly reluctant to agree to such a radical move that would be interpreted as a harsh blow to Eshkol in the midst of the growing emergency. A stalemate ensued: Begin was unwilling to enter the cabinet without Rafi, while Rafi demanded the defense portfolio for Dayan. To this, Golda was unwilling to agree.

The next day, on May 28, Golda, Barkat and Shraga Netser met with Peres and Almogi. Peres argued that Rafi wanted Ben-Gurion to head the cabinet again, but would be willing to accept the appointment of Dayan as minister of defense. Peres also hinted that for the sake of the creation of a national unity government, Rafi would be willing to dissolve itself and return to Mapai, saying “if for that you tell us that we have to dissolve, we shall do so”. Golda retorted that Mapai was not exactly the right party to make such a decision for Rafi. She was still opposed to taking the defense portfolio away from Eshkol although she agreed that Dayan should join the cabinet and deal with as yet undefined security matters. That was her first breaking point. But Rafi refused to accept the proposal and Peres issued a statement saying that for the sake of national unity Rafi was prepared to dissolve itself. The statement made an impact on the public that was yearning for both national unity and the return of the old heroes.

All these contacts only increased the pressure on Eshkol to do something to regain his lost stature, image and the support of public opinion. The new idea that emerged was to appoint Yigal Allon as minister of defense. On that day, Eshkol proposed to Dayan that he join an inner cabinet that would include Eshkol, Allon, Begin, Eban and Yigael Yadin. Dayan rejected the idea and said he wanted an operational position and not be simply a councillor. When Golda heard that Eshkol was considering offering Dayan a top command in the IDF, she told Eshkol: “Before you put a uniform on him you better invite him here for a meeting”.

As noted above, in the early days of the crisis Allon was in the Soviet Union. For some unknown reason, Galili did not see any urgent need to recall him back to Israel, and instead of being at the center of events in Israel, Allon attended a marginal conference on social security in Leningrad, where he later claimed he had waited for a meeting with the Soviet leaders, something that the British Prime Minister Harold Wilson had promised to arrange. When Allon finally returned to Israel, Golda came around to the possibility that he would be a candidate for minister of defense, if only to allay the mounting public hysteria. She may have thought that he would not really hold the position of defense minister but serve next to Eshkol as his senior right-hand man in the Defense Ministry, because making ministerial changes required Knesset approval, something that was very hard to obtain in those tense days. She also knew that Dayan was willing to fulfill any meaningful job in the defense establishment and the IDF as long as he could

be in the center of the arena and bring his vast experience into play. She thought that Dayan might even be willing to serve under Allon or become commanding officer either Northern or Southern Command and in that case be subordinate to Rabin. Dayan simply did not want to sit at home during a major national crisis. By now it was evident that it was impossible to grant someone authority without awarding the bearer the full title that position entailed. There was need to adopt certain decisions in Mapai because Allon was one of the heads of *Achdut Ha'avodah*. Then the issue would have to be decided in the cabinet and finally in the Knesset. Allon had already visited some of the fronts and the Defense Ministry. So did Dayan as a private citizen with the approval of both Eshkol and Rabin. Reluctantly, Golda agreed to the appointment of Allon as defense minister. After the war she explained:

Everything was ready for victory. I had no doubt even for one moment that there would be war when Nasser concentrated his army in Sinai and asked for the withdrawal of UNEF. I had no doubt that the IDF would triumph, that the defense forces were properly prepared. Therefore it was unjust to take the defense portfolio from Eshkol, in which he was so absorbed that he failed to sense that a plot was hatched against him. However, I also wanted national unity more than in the past, but in the framework of a ministerial committee. I changed my mind when it became clear that under the law this was impossible. I realized that unity was vital especially after the decision to wait. I saw that proposals for partial co-optation were not accepted and I agreed to add members to the cabinet. With that, I also thought it would be right, for the sake of continuity and to calm the public, that Yigael Allon be released from his duties in the Ministry of Labor starting Saturday, 27 May, and assist Eshkol in his role as defense minister. I rejected any harm to the status of the prime minister *per se* as well as from an international point of view.<sup>13</sup>

When a delegation came to see her to try and persuade her to agree that Eshkol give up the defense portfolio, she replied in a vivid way: “I shall lie here and not agree to hurt him, especially when there was no room for that on the eve of war”.<sup>14</sup> But other, more dramatic events soon unfolded that changed the entire situation. Eban returned from his trip and informed the cabinet that the United States asked for additional time for diplomacy and he was recommending that Israel give Washington the two weeks it sought. The cabinet approved his proposal and Eshkol decided to make a radio address to the nation that very evening. Preoccupied, troubled, suffering from a cold and under massive tension and pressure, Eshkol rushed to the Israel Radio studios in Tel Aviv with a script that had been written by others to which there were added corrections in the handwriting of his

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<sup>13</sup> Gilboa, *Six Years—Six Days*, p. 174.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 174; see also Anita Shapira, *Yigal Allon—The Spring of his Life*, Tel Aviv, 2004, pp. 481–499.

political adviser Adi Yaffe. Instead of taping his speech, he decided to broadcast live. In a sad and tired voice that showed the tensions he was laboring under, Eshkol informed the nation at large and the tens of thousands of reserve soldiers along the 1967 lines that although the

government of Israel is certain that the blockade of the Straits of Tiran to Israeli shipping is an act of aggression, and we shall defend ourself under the right to self-defense awarded to any nation...the cabinet has determined directions to continue the political activity in the international arena, aimed at encouraging international factors to undertake more efficient measures to ensure freedom of navigation in the Straits of Tiran. We shall act in the international arena to bring about the withdrawal of armed concentrations from Israel's southern borders and we shall continue to trust in our own powers.<sup>15</sup>

A number of times Eshkol stumbled over his words. There were long seconds when the prime minister paused as though seeking the right word. The country was flabbergasted. Was this old and tired man going to lead them in the forthcoming war? Instead of his usual optimism and cheerful manner, Eshkol sounded like a broken man. The moves to replace him as minister of defense assumed additional urgency. Rafi activists organized a demonstration outside Golda's home in Ramat Aviv calling for Eshkol's replacement by Dayan. They also sought to block her way as she drove to Mapai headquarters in Tel Aviv. Another demonstration, this time consisting of women whose husbands had been called up, later known as "the Merry Wives of Windsor", also aimed their barbs at Golda who was seen as the only barrier to bring about a change in the cabinet.

On May 30, with the country still reeling from the "stuttering" speech, the Mapai Knesset faction met in Tel Aviv for a stormy session. Dov Yossef, who was ousted from the cabinet by Eshkol in 1965 as minister of justice because he supported Ben-Gurion's call to appoint a commission of inquiry on the Lavon Affair, asked who approved the intention of appointing Yigal Allon as defense minister. Golda had to admit that the move had not been discussed by any authorized party organ and not approved as required. Eshkol cried: "What have I done that you think I am a poor defense minister?" But by now Eshkol was prepared to give Dayan any position and appoint him as what he termed "minister of the armies". Golda asked for clarifications: what exactly would Dayan do? Eshkol said he was

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<sup>15</sup> Statement by the prime minister 26 May 1967. On the Six Days War see Goldstein, Eshkol, pp. 533–578; Bar-Zohar, Phoenix, pp. 393–402; Eban, Personal Witness; Rabin, Service Book, Vol. II; Tom Segev, *And the Land Changed its Face*, Jerusalem, 2005; Michael Oren, *Six Days of War, the War that Changed the Face of the Middle East*, Or Yehuda, 2004; Ami Gluska, *Eshkol—Give the Order, The IDF and the Government of Israel on the Road to the Six Days War 1963–1967*, Tel Aviv, 2004; Dayan, *Milestones*; Shlomo Nakdimon, *Toward Zero Hour—The Drama that Preceded the Six Days War*, Tel Aviv, 1968; FRUS, Documents pertaining to the Six Days War, Washington, 2005.

not sure what it meant, a minister of the armies would give advice regarding the armies, he said. Golda was adamant—what exactly would he do? She was not ready to let things remain undefined, that would be a recipe for disaster. She also objected to Dayan being recommissioned in the IDF. By now, Eshkol realized that he had lost the support of his closest allies who no longer trusted him as defense minister. Among them were Kaddish Luz, Shraga Netser, Akiva Govrin, Zalman Aranne, Zeev Sherf, Reuven Barkatt and Yaacov Shimshon Shapira. They came to the conclusion that the position must be divided—while Eshkol would remain prime minister, he would have to give up the Defense Ministry. Some still thought Allon was the right man. At some point in the discussion an idea was raised that Dayan be appointed foreign minister, Allon defense minister and Eban deputy prime minister dealing with information. Eban was deeply wounded and threatened to resign. The idea was dropped. But all this was no longer relevant. The atmosphere was ugly and Golda realized that at the end of the day she would have to support a broad-based cabinet. She recalled that on May 26, she had met with two former generals, Yehoshafat Harkabi who had been director of military intelligence in the Sinai War and Dan Tolkowsky, the airforce commander in that war. Both asked that she agree to a broad-based cabinet for the sake of morale in the IDF. Rabin's brief collapse also showed the need for an authoritative defense minister. This meeting, too, ended with no clear-cut decision.<sup>16</sup>

That evening, she met with the leaders of Gachal: Menachem Begin, Elimelech Rimalt, Yosef Sapir and Yochanan Bader, and informed them that Eshkol was inviting them to join the cabinet. Since there was no time to enable the cabinet to resign in order for it to be reconstituted in a new and broad format and seek Knesset approval, she proposed that Gachal would have two ministers without portfolio. Begin then asked her point blank: "What about Dayan?" "Is he your candidate?" she retorted. She also informed them that Rafi was invited to join the cabinet and would have one minister without portfolio. They asked for time to consider the offer.

The next day, Israel faced the terrible possibility of a three-front war. King Hussein flew to Cairo, accompanied by Achmad Shukeiri, the head of the Palestine Liberation Organization, and signed a defense pact with Egypt placing the Jordanian Legion under Egyptian command. Reports circulated about the entry of Iraqi and Saudi forces to Jordan, thus violating one of Israel's major taboos. Israel's military doctrine had already determined in the early 1950's that Israel would launch a war against Jordan if foreign forces entered that country, thus threatening Jerusalem and tearing Israel in two parts in the narrow coastal

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<sup>16</sup> Brecher, *Foreign Policy System of Israel*, p. 388.

waistline between Tul Karem and Netanyahu. This could also threaten Israeli shipping in the Red Sea and Israel's water sources south of the Sea of Galilee. Hussein's signature of the defense pact with Egypt violated three of the five taboos at once. Egyptian commando units were flown to Jordan and moved into the West Bank. Israel now felt the noose tightening around its neck. Many Israelis were now terrified that while their country was on the eve of another Holocaust, its leaders were busy with petty politics and marginal quarrels. On that morning, May 31, 1967, as she was getting into her car to travel to Tel Aviv, she heard one her neighbours who blocked her car scream: "I won't let her go, she should stay home and maybe we shall have a brave government of national unity that will go to war".<sup>17</sup> He was unaware of her meeting with Begin the previous night and that her resistance to a government of national unity had already been broken. Now there remained the central issue—who would be the defense minister.

On May 31, the Political Committee of the Alignment met and decided to seek the appointment of Yigal Allon as defense minister. Golda abstained in the vote and explained that she had no objection to Allon, but she could not ask Eshkol to give up the defense portfolio as long as he himself did not see the necessity to do so. She accused her colleagues of bowing to the mass public hysteria that was instigated by the Rafi leadership, mainly by Ben-Gurion and Peres. In his colorful language, Eban injected: "Any comparison between Peres and McCarthy would be in favor of McCarthy". Golda added sarcastically: "This would be the first Socialist government to hand over power to a fascist. They say one thing and its opposite at the same time. They—Rafi—say we must seize Tiran. We ask how? They say we have to retrench". This was the first time she called Dayan a fascist. While she opposed the appointment of Allon as a full-fledged minister of defense, she was ready to see him move to the Defense Ministry and assist Eshkol from there, but not as a defense minister with authority over the army. At some point someone even raised the idea that Golda replace Eshkol as prime minister. Her reply was quick: "There is nothing to discuss about replacing Eshkol and there is no justification to hurt his standing, and as a rule, on the eve of war, there is no room to make changes". Clearly she was not prepared to become prime minister over Eshkol's dead body. She remembered well the circumstances that prevailed when she replaced Moshe Sharett and was determined that this would never occur again. That evening she again convened the Mapai Secretariat where opposition to the appointment of Allon was raised. She was asked to inform Eshkol that Dayan would replace him in the Defense Ministry. Some participants even demanded that Eshkol refrain from making any changes in the constitution of

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<sup>17</sup> Gilboa, *Six Years—Six Days*, pp. 176–177.

the cabinet without obtaining the prior approval of the authorized party organs. Golda refused to go to Eshkol and said, “I shall not fulfill this decision even if I have to resign as party secretary”.<sup>18</sup>

The issue was finally resolved not by Mapai but by the National Religious Party. Its leaders warned Eshkol that if Dayan was not appointed defense minister they would quit the cabinet and cause a major political crisis. That was the final straw. Allon realized that his chances of becoming defense minister were slim and the price would be a monumental cabinet crisis at the worse possible time, so he announced publicly on June 1, 1967, that he was removing his candidacy, thus opening the way for Dayan to join the cabinet as defense minister. This caused a major row among the Rafi leaders who met at Ben-Gurion’s home. While most of them supported the entry of Dayan, Ben-Gurion was opposed. He feared that once Dayan would become minister of defense, Israel would launch a preemptive strike. He, together with some Mapai and National Religious Party leaders, still hoped that Dayan would avoid a war. They forgot the lessons of 1956, when Dayan was the major force who pushed for war.

On June 1, 1967, Eshkol informed the Mapai Secretariat that he had decided to broaden the base of the cabinet and there would be another Mapai minister, “at this moment I am not proposing a name of a man, but that could also mean a woman”, who would join the cabinet. Golda interjected and said: “If you mention that, I want you to announce the reply of that woman”, Eshkol then said she had rejected his offer.<sup>19</sup> During that discussion there were still some who thought Dayan ought to be appointed commanding officer southern front, thereby ignoring the norm that military appointments at that level were made by the chief of staff and not the Mapai Secretariat. Tension rose. The members of the Secretariat were unaware that the final decision was in fact out of their hands. Gachal conditioned its entry to the cabinet, and the National Religious Party its continued membership in that body, on giving Dayan the defense portfolio. Once some of the Secretariat members realized this fact, there began a race to appoint Dayan. Some Knesset members demanded an immediate decision. The minister of education, Zalman Aranne, was the only one to support the Allon candidacy. No one supported leaving the Defense Ministry in Eshkol’s hands. They had lost their confidence in the prime minister and defense minister who was also their party leader. Panic ensued. Golda could barely prevent a vote on Dayan’s entry to the cabinet, saying the Secretariat had never voted on such matters, thus avoiding a vote. But she realized she had lost the battle. She went to an adjacent room,

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<sup>18</sup> Dov Yossef, *The Dove and the Sword*, Ramat Gan, 1975, p. 404.

<sup>19</sup> Gilboa, *Six Years—Six Days*, pp. 188–189; Mapai Secretariat 1 June 1967.



called Galili and then Eshkol and informed them that the consensus in the Secretariat was to appoint Dayan. Eshkol finally realized he could no longer oppose his closest colleagues who abandoned him at this critical hour.<sup>20</sup> The discussion ended with the following resolution: “To Eshkol and all cabinet members, ours and not ours, to all of you we can only wish one thing, that you will have the energy to conduct the battle. We trust you, we have trusted you before. May you go from strength to strength”.

Golda was the only senior Mapai leader who consistently supported Eshkol all the way. Her senses told her that Israel would emerge victorious from the war and she saw no reason to share the fruits of victory with others. In retrospect, she was right. But during those harrowing hours of tension and bewilderment, she failed to properly assess the public mood and ignored its sentiments. Once again, she was a victim of her ‘Bolshevik’ sentiment that said that a party should never bow to the dictates of the ‘street’ and that it could never trust public opinion that did not really know what was good for the country. She understood that for the first time in Israel’s history, the street was able to dictate a major political change, and that a decision was made without the proper procedures, meaning prior discussions and the attainment of a consensus among the leadership before the issue was brought to a vote before the representative bodies of the party, and all this because they fell prey to the hysteria that gripped Israel at the time. Golda never forgot nor did she forgive the heads of Rafi, chiefly Shimon Peres, for the role they played during those days of high anxiety. She knew that Ben-Gurion was actually removed from reality, but Peres knew well what was happening and she was convinced that he used the emergency to dictate a major political move designed to sully the reputation of the prime minister and of Mapai. She felt that the leader of Gachal acted from more exalted reasons, but the Rafi people—who until two years before had been part and parcel of Mapai—she would never forgive. Peres would pay the political price as long as she was around. In her memoirs, she wrote that it was hard for her to believe that the war would have ended in a different manner had Dayan not join the cabinet. She rightly wondered if Dayan was the best candidate and why Ben-Gurion objected to his appointment as defense minister.

At the end of this action-filled day, June 3, 1967, Eshkol met with the members of the Alignment Political Committee and later with the Mapai Secretariat and announced that Dayan would become the defense minister. Several days later, Dayan boasted: “It took Nasser and Hussein to make me defense minister.” Golda was convinced for the rest of her life that there had been no need to remove

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<sup>20</sup> Ben-Gurion, *The State of Israel Renewed*, p. 812.

Eshkol from defense. He had prepared the IDF for war. She also claimed that the IDF would have won the war even without Dayan at the Defense Ministry. In retrospect, it is difficult to argue with this view.<sup>21</sup> Dayan did fulfill a certain role in the war, but he came into the picture somewhat late to make any major changes in the military plans that were prepared and exercised long before. His name and aura did provide a sense of greater security to the public, and perhaps this was his major contribution to the Six Days War. His talents and vision were very much in evidence after the war when he was in charge of the Israeli policy in the occupied territories. But on that day, the veteran Mapai leaders found themselves facing an entirely new situation: Gachal and Rafi joined a government of national unity. The boycott of Herut was lifted for the first time in Israel's history and Menachem Begin sat at the cabinet table, actually with the blessing of the man who had boycotted, taunted and derided him all those years—David Ben-Gurion.

Few Israelis were aware that over that weekend, the director of the Mossad General Meir Amit had been in Washington. He traveled secretly to the American capital after a number of generals, headed by the Director of Military Intelligence Aharon Yariv, had persuaded Eshkol that perhaps Eban did not fully understand what the Johnson administration was telling Israel and that Amit, with his excellent connections to the heads of the CIA and the Pentagon, would find out finally what the true intentions of the United States were. From his conversations with CIA Director Richard Helms and mainly with Defense Secretary Robert McNamara, he gathered that the United States had no intention of acting alone to break the naval blockade of the Straits of Tiran. When Amit asked McNamara point blank what “would you do if you were in my place”, the secretary of defense said: “your place is to be at home right now.” Eban later claimed that from his own sources he gathered that America despaired of any international action and came to the conclusion that it might be better if Israel did the job by itself and quickly. Eban said that much to Rabin on the eve of the war. Amit returned to Israel on Saturday night, June 3 and went straight to the home of the prime minister in Jerusalem where a small group of key decision makers were waiting for him. Although Amit preferred to wait several more days, Dayan's proposal was accepted: Israel would launch its preemptive aerial strike on Monday morning June 5. The next morning the entire cabinet authorized the prime minister and the minister of defense to take all necessary measures to ensure the security of the State of Israel. That weekend, Golda was at home nursing a cold. She was utterly exhausted from the events of the past three weeks. She felt that a great deal of injustice had been done to Eshkol, that he was the victim of circumstances over which he had no

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<sup>21</sup> Meir, *My Life*, p. 264.

control. She may have harbored some doubts about his leadership capability and style, but she saw no reason to replace him at the time of a severe crisis when it appeared to some that Israel was on the verge of extinction. Late on Sunday, June 4, Eshkol came to visit her and informed her of the decision to strike and of what Amit had found out in Washington. Soon after he left, she suggested to her son Menachem to tape the window panes of their home with masking tapes.<sup>22</sup>

The next day, the fateful June 5, 1967, she was at home when the sirens wailed at 0750 over all of Israel announcing to those in the know that Israel had launched its air strike and most of its available fighter planes were on their way to destroy the air forces of Egypt, Jordan and Syria. The task was completed in less than three hours and thus the first and decisive part of the Six Days War was effectively over. What remained now for the IDF was to annihilate the ground and armored forces of Egypt and Syria. Jordan was warned by Israel not to intervene in the war and that if it stayed out it, he would not be harmed. Hussein felt he had no other choice but to embark on a war in which he lost the West Bank and East Jerusalem in less than three days. On the third day of the war, Jordan asked for a cease-fire. Two days later, with the IDF on the banks of the Suez Canal, Egypt also asked for a cease-fire. On Saturday, June 10, Syria agreed to a cease-fire after it lost most of the Golan Heights. Israel had no choice but to accept a cease-fire. The Soviet Union had issued an ultimatum to Israel: halt your advance or face the might of the Soviet army. The war was over at 2 pm on June 10. Israel had won an amazing victory that altered its entire history. From now on, the country would live under the impact of the Six Days War and on its humanitarian and territorial consequences.

Golda followed the earth-shattering events from her home and from the party headquarters. The political tsunami of the previous three weeks was forgotten for the time being, while the entire nation united against its enemies and followed breathlessly the rapid advance of the IDF on all fronts. The excitement reached its peak on the third day of the war, June 7, when the paratroopers arrived at the Western Wall in the Old City of Jerusalem. There are almost no details regarding Golda's timetable during the war. It is known that on Wednesday, June 7, she was at the IDF headquarters with Rabin when news came that Israeli planes accidentally attacked an American warship, the USS "Liberty", off the shores of Israel. Israel's Minister Plenipotentiary to Washington Ephraim Evron reported this to President Johnson's National Security Adviser Eugene Rostow and the latter told the president that when Rabin received the news he almost fainted. That

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<sup>22</sup> Meir, *My Mother Golda Meir*, p. 181. See also Meir Amit, *Head to Head—Personal View of Great Events and Secret Affairs*, Tel Aviv, 1999, pp. 229–246.

evening, she chaired a festive meeting of the Mapai Secretariat convened to hear a report by the prime minister. When Eshkol spoke, Jordan had already asked for a cease-fire and the IDF was in full control of the West Bank and East Jerusalem, most of the Sinai Peninsula including Sharm el-Sheikh and the Gaza Strip. There remained the issue of the Golan Heights. Congratulating the prime minister, Golda said that you do not wage war like the story in the Greek mythology where the good lord jumped from Zeus and Minerva's head. She stressed that the victory was the result of many years of preparations, certainly in recent years. The hint was clear—it was Eshkol who prepared the army and not Dayan who came at the last minute, but had already become the hero of the war.

Even before the outbreak of the war, Golda was approached by Sapir and the Chairman of the Jewish Agency Louis Pincus to participate in a major fund-raising campaign. The goal now was to raise half a billion dollars, a sum that was almost fully attained by the United Jewish Appeal in the United States and by the Keren Hayesod-Israel United Appeal campaigns in the rest of the world. She had to delay her trip because of the political upheaval connected with the defense portfolio. In the course of the war, frantic calls reached her demanding that she must travel at once to the United States. Sapir insisted that she must drop everything else and raise funds as she had done in the War of Independence. She realized that her presence in Israel in those days was not absolutely necessary, as she was not a cabinet member, she agreed to travel, and similar to 1948, urgently. On Friday, June 9, when the IDF began its campaign to capture the Golan Heights, she traveled to Jerusalem and went to the Western Wall, an experience she described in the following words:

I went to the Wall together with some soldiers. There in front of it stood a plain wooden table with some submachine guns on it. Uniformed paratroopers wrapped in prayer shawls clung so tightly to the Wall that it seemed impossible to separate them from it. They and the Wall were one. Only a few hours earlier they had fought furiously for the liberation of Jerusalem and had seen their comrades fall for its sake. Now, standing before the Wall, they wrapped themselves in prayer shawls and wept, and I, too, took a sheet of paper, wrote the word shalom on it and pushed it into a cranny of the Wall, as I had seen the Jews do so long ago. As I stood there, one of the soldiers (I doubt that he knew who I was) suddenly put his arms around me, laid his head on my shoulder, and we cried together. I suppose he needed the release and the comfort of an old woman's warmth, and for me it was one of the most moving moments of my life.<sup>23</sup>

From the Wall she drove directly to the airport and got on a plane that brought her to New York. Two days later, she addressed a mass rally at Madison Square

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<sup>23</sup> Meir, *My Life*, p. 78.

Garden. The United Jewish Appeal gathered some 18,000 excited Jews who came to hear the Jewish mother telling them of her children's great victory. From her words it was easy to discern her mood and also her thoughts for the coming days, thoughts that would guide her until the Yom Kippur War. As usual, she spoke with no notes, from the heart, in her people's English, in her usual simplicity: "And once again we have won a war, the third one in the brief history of our independence. The last thing Israelis want is to win wars. We want peace." She then described the spirit of the people and its army and the help showered on them by Diaspora Jewry. She mentioned promises made and then violated and arrangements entered into that were not honored. She sarcastically said that she had hoped that now,

we were not going to be told what a wonderful people the Israelis are. They win wars every ten years, and they have done it again. Now that they have won this round, they can go back where they came from, so that Syrian gunners on the Golan Heights can again shoot into the kibbutzim, so that Jordanian legionnaires on the towers of the Old City can again shell at will, so that the Gaza Strip can again be a nest for terrorists and the Sinai Desert can again become a staging ground for Nasser's divisions. Is there anybody who is bold enough to say to us: Go home, start preparing your nine- and ten-year-olds for the next war? I am sure that every decent person in the world will say no, and—forgive me for being so blunt—most important of all, we ourselves say no.<sup>24</sup>

18,000 people rejoined her by shouting loudly—no. But Golda had no illusion—Israel now faced a long and arduous political struggle to retain all or parts of the vast achievements it had won in the recent war.

Now, in New York, far from Israel that was engulfed in euphoria, she could assess what had happened in the previous month, an assessment that would accompany her until her dying day. Several weeks earlier, Israel's very existence had been challenged. The world stood idly by and apart from France, whose president ordered that military emergency stores be opened for the IDF until he clamped an embargo on arms for Israel on June 5, not a single nation lifted a finger to help Israel. Golda was not surprised at what she termed "De Gaulles's treachery". Her attitude to France was not a secret. Britain and a number of European nations may have had some thin hopes for an American diplomatic activity that would somehow open the Straits of Tiran. But their leaders knew deep in their hearts that they had no intention of doing anything apart from cheering Israel and expressing their solidarity with the beleaguered nation. Israel found itself in a tightening noose. The only ones who were prepared to help were Diaspora Jewry. Thousands sought to reach the besieged nation to volunteer for any

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<sup>24</sup> For the text of her speech on 11 June 1967 see Syrkin, *Golda Meir Speaks Out*, pp. 156–162.

job necessary. Hundreds of thousands contributed money that covered the costs of the war. They were not prepared to see the Jewish state disappear scant twenty years after the Holocaust. Jews understood that it was Israel that guaranteed continued Jewish existence and survival, hence its continued existence was vital not only for Israel's citizens but for the entire Jewish people.

Golda was fully aware that the brilliant victory was the result of long and painstaking preparations of the IDF orchestrated by Defense Minister Levi Eshkol, Chief of Staff Yitzhak Rabin and the members of the IDF General Staff. She knew how vulnerable Israel was on that Monday, June 5, 1967, when only some ten jet fighters were on the ground to defend Israel's skies from enemy planes, while most of the Israel Air Force planes were systematically attacking enemy airfields and planes belonging to the air forces of Egypt, Syria, Jordan and Iraq. She knew there were barely three tanks in Jerusalem on that Monday morning and less than a hundred soldiers in Eilat to prevent it being cut off from the rest of Israel. And now the IDF had captured the Sinai Peninsula all the way to the Suez Canal, the entire West Bank including East Jerusalem, the Gaza Strip and the Golan Heights. The 1949 Armistice Agreements were now finally dead and buried, replaced by Security Council-authorized cease-fire agreements. The nightmare of demilitarized zones, UN supervision, constant Syria shelling of settlements in the Hulah Valley, her permanent menu during her decade as foreign minister, all this now evaporated in the smoke of war. In her address in Madison Square Garden, she already made it clear to her audience that Israel must never return to the previous borders. The Israeli nation could not in the future be placed under the very existential threat that preceded the Six Days War.

It is not clear whether she transmitted her feelings to the government of Israel. That body had already decided on a two-stage policy. The first, announced by Eshkol in his victory speech to the Knesset, said that the IDF would withdraw only to final peace borders that would be determined through direct negotiations with the neighboring Arab states. Until then, Israel would continue to hold on to the territories it had seized in the recent war. The second decision was adopted by the cabinet on June 19, 1967, and was so secret that even Chief of Staff Rabin was not informed of its contents. The cabinet resolved that in return for full, contractual peace treaties with Egypt and Syria, Israel would be ready to return all of the Golan Heights and Sinai. As for the West Bank, Israel sought special arrangements with the Jordanian kingdom.<sup>25</sup> There was no doubt that Israel would hold on to united Jerusalem as well as the Gaza Strip. The resolution was also supported by Menachem Begin. Eban was instructed to transmit the contents of this

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<sup>25</sup> Eban, *Autobiography*, p. 436.

resolution to the United States so that Washington would transmit it to Cairo and Damascus. It was a very generous offer, but at the worst possible time. Reeling under their humiliating defeat, Egypt, Syria, and Jordan were not in the mood to enter into negotiations with Israel from a position of total weakness. While it is not clear if Secretary of State Dean Rusk, to whom Eban delivered the message, did in fact transmit it to the Arab leaders, they, in any case, rejected any Israeli offer out of hand. Israel then stated that it would not return to the June 5, 1967, lines, that Eban in one interview called “the Auschwitz borders”. It would now be Israel that would determine its basic security needs and insist on direct negotiations. It was not prepared to replay the 1957 scenario in which significant military achievements were squandered due to massive political pressure. Now Israel asked that the United States would not sow any seeds of hope among the Arab leaders that it would pull out the chestnuts from the fire for them and somehow the Israelis would fold their tents and go back to the old Armistice Lines.

The Soviet Union was not prepared to sit idly by and watch their Arab clients suffer not only a humiliating military defeat but also a political one. That power called for convening an emergency session of the United Nations General Assembly in New York and despatched to the United States its prime minister Alexei Kosygin. Once the military battle was over, the political one was about to unfold, and for Israel the key question was how to retain the fruits of victory. The diplomatic struggle was conducted brilliantly by Foreign Minister Abba Eban in one of his finest hours. Golda was asked to remain in New York and join the Israel Delegation to the United Nations as an observer representing the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee. She now sat behind Eban in the second row of the Israel Delegation to the United Nations and watched him as he fielded many attempts to restore the status quo ante.<sup>26</sup>

The Soviets went further and called, in addition to total Israeli withdrawal from the territories, for war indemnity and demanded a sharp condemnation of Israel, branding it an aggressor nation. The Russian draft resolution failed to obtain the required two-thirds majority. An American draft resolution, based on a five-point peace plan formulated by President Johnson on June 19, was not presented at all because the Americans feared it would be defeated. The five points would later be incorporated in Security Council Resolution 242. Johnson called for a durable and lasting peace in the Middle East to be achieved by direct negotiations between the parties. The peace would be based on certain key principles, among them mutual recognition of the political independence and territorial integrity of each nation in the region, freedom of navigation, a just solution to

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<sup>26</sup> For the post-Six Days War diplomacy see Eban, *Autobiography*, pp. 424–447.

the refugee problem, arms limitations and the right of all nations in the region to live in peace and security. Another draft resolution tabled by Albania called for an unconditional Israeli withdrawal. It won 21 votes in favor, 71 against and 27 abstained. A Yugoslav draft resolution that called for Israeli withdrawal also failed. Another effort was made by 18 Latin American nations that called for Israeli withdrawal in return for an end of the state of war. Israel saw this idea as highly risky, but it also failed to win two-thirds majority: 57 voted in favor, 43 against, 20 abstained and 2 were absent. The General Assembly failed to come up with any resolution that called on Israel to withdraw unconditionally. Israel won a major diplomatic battle and Eban emerged as the hero of this arena and rightly so (unlike Dayan, who was seen, with little justification, as the hero of the war). The General Assembly then resolved to hand over the problem to the Security Council. For the time being, Israel could remain where it was. However, when Israel adopted certain measures designed to unite Jerusalem, the General Assembly overwhelmingly voted to declare these measures null and void. To this day, this body still does not recognize the unification of Jerusalem.

Golda's role in this diplomatic struggle was quite significant. She sought to persuade many UN representatives, chief among them those from African nations, not to vote in favor of hostile resolutions, or at least abstain. In one instant, this also entailed a personal sacrifice. It became apparent that the vote of the Ivory Coast had a significant role that would influence the votes of other African nations. Its president Felix Houphouët Boigny was on a state visit to West Germany at the time. Golda was in Paris attending a conference of the Socialist International. Eban asked her to travel to Germany and meet with Houphouët Boigny in order to persuade him not to vote against Israel. He knew well that Golda had not been to Germany since 1928 and the very idea of going to Germany would be abhorrent to her. But, being a good trooper, she heeded the call and spent several hours in Bad Godesberg meeting with the Ivory Coast president. She made no effort to meet with German officials and once she successfully completed her mission, she sped out of Germany. This would be her first and last visit to the Federal Republic of Germany.<sup>27</sup>

That summer, she also found some time to relax in the company of her son and daughter-in-law who were on a sabbatical near New York. On the way back to Israel, she decided to take several days off for rest near Zurich in an attempt to lose weight and to recover from the huge tensions of the previous weeks. A close personal friend, Finance Minister Zeev Sherf, came to visit her in Zurich. He informed her that Eshkol's health was rapidly deteriorating; in addition to

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<sup>27</sup> Meir, *My Life*, p. 130.



his heart ailment, cancer had been detected which for the time being was successfully kept a secret from the public that thought that Eshkol only had some heart problems. Sherf added that it was not clear how long Eshkol would be able to function and both wondered if Eshkol could ever recover from the blows he had suffered on the eve of the war when he was forced to give up the Defense Ministry. Eshkol had become a shadow of himself. He became bitter and suspicious. His lively sense of humor and optimism slowly evaporated. His aides made frantic efforts to rebuild his image in various public relations campaigns that failed. He could never compete with Dayan's charisma, then at the height of his fame in Israel and abroad. It was virtually impossible to "sell" Eshkol to the public. In that conversation, Sherf told Golda: "look Golda, you will be prime minister". She of course refused to accept this idea, but Sherf argued that if she persisted in her opposition the party would another face a split and she would have no other choice but to succeed Eshkol. Finally she said: "For the time being he is alive, let's leave it."<sup>28</sup> She did not reject the idea out of hand and Sherf reported to his friends that she could easily be persuaded when the time came. He was right.

Back in Israel, she was not a party to the great euphoria that prevailed in the country following the shock of the unexpected and swift victory. Her approach was sober and realistic and her position slowly evolved. At this stage, there was no need to incite a war among the Jews as long as there was no partner on the other side. Certainly there was no room at all for talk about territorial concessions and this became more acute when the Arab leaders declared explicitly at the end of their summit conference in Khartoum at the end of August 1967 the doctrine of No Peace ("sulkh" in Arabic), No Recognition and No Negotiations with Israel as well as adherence to the rights of the Palestinians to their native land. In a discussion in Mapai's Political Committee that summer about the future of the territories, Golda posed a rhetorical question: "What is the truth? Did the government debate and decide? It is better without declarations. As to the core of the issue, I am still wavering".<sup>29</sup>

On September 14, 1967, Mapai's Secretariat once again discussed the future of the territories. Golda said,

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<sup>28</sup> Tamir, ed., Golda, p. 45.

<sup>29</sup> Quoted by Shlomo Gazit, *The Stick and the Carrot, The Israeli Administration in Judea and Samaria*, Tel Aviv, 1985, p. 145. See also Reuven Pedhatsur, *Victory and Embarrassment: The Policy of the Eshkol Government in the Territories after the Six Day War*, Tel Aviv, 1996, and Goldstein, Eshkol, pp. 579–600; Haggai Tsoref, ed. *Golda Meir, Israel's Fourth Prime Minister*, Jerusalem 2016, pp. 255–271.

When I asked Eshkol what are we going to do with a million Arabs, he said: I understand, you like the dowry but not the bride. It's really so. But have you ever seen anyone who got the dowry without the bride? I am shocked not because we have not yet set a date when we shall make a final decision. I am shocked by all this talk in the country...how can it be? Each one has a patent...Mapam too makes declarations and hands over the West Bank to Hussein. Aharon Yadlin says: we must undertake an initiative and not wait for a phone call from Hussein. And I say clearly: certainly wait. Certainly now... Where is the fire? No...now it is Hussein who has to worry, let us make him worry a bit. God forbid, let us not run after him...

At the conclusion of the discussion, she said, "We shall determine the final borders only in an agreement and negotiations with the relevant partners."<sup>30</sup> At the end of July, in a discussion at the Political Committee of the Alignment, she thought that regarding the West Bank Israel must remain on the mountain ridge and demilitarize the area to the Jordan River. In response, Eshkol said: "I fear that the matter of the ridge that Golda is talking about is not realistic, because the majority of the Arabs will remain in our territory".

Soon many voices were heard questioning the long-term consequences of a prolonged occupation on Israeli society and nation. Once again Golda fumed. In a December 1967 discussion in Mapai's Secretariat, she said, "It shocks me. I fully rebel against Amos Oz, Yizhar Smilansky, professors and intellectuals who have injected here the moral issue. For me the highest morality is that the Jewish people have the right to exist. Without this there is no morality in the world."<sup>31</sup> But at this stage no one was seriously proposing a unilateral Israeli withdrawal from the territories. Even Security Council Resolution 242, adopted on November 22, 1967, did not call for an automatic withdrawal, but in the framework of a package deal that would include permanent arrangements regarding borders, security, mutual recognition, freedom of navigation and resolution of the refugee issue. Many in Israel did fear this resolution that empowered the Secretary General of the United Nations to dispatch to the region a personal emissary on his behalf to promote peace based on the principles of Resolution 242. The fear focused more on an imposed withdrawal without an agreement, as demanded by the Arab states who interpreted 242 to mean Israeli withdrawal in return for no political arrangement. Israel was prepared to accept the principle of land for peace, but the Arabs rejected this idea out of hand. They persisted in their demand that the IDF must withdraw fully from all the occupied territories back to the lines of June 5, 1967. First there must be unconditional withdrawal to be followed by some arrangements that could be made regarding security, and all this without direct negotiations. Resolution 242 does not in fact mention direct negotiations. The United Nations emissary was a stiff and cold Swedish dip-

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<sup>30</sup> Secretariat, 14 September 1967.

<sup>31</sup> Mapai Secretariat, 12 December 1967.

lomat, Gunnar V. Jarring, who was at the time Sweden's Ambassador to Moscow. Israeli diplomats were not happy with his appointment because he had retained his ambassadorial post in Moscow and lacked any prior Middle East experience.

At the end of 1967 and in early 1968 Jarring was busy in a shuttle diplomacy, flying from one capital to another seeking to find common ground to implement Resolution 242. Soon it became evident to him that the Arabs were unwilling to enter into direct or even indirect negotiations with Israel. They even rejected a Rhodes style negotiating tactics—the parties would meet in the same site and the mediator would shuttle among them bearing messages. While Israel demanded direct negotiations, it was prepared to accept Jarring's mediation. The Arabs went further and said they would not discuss anything prior to the beginning of Israeli withdrawal towards the June 5, 1967, lines. They also insisted on the resolution of the "Palestinian Problem" in all its aspects before any progress would be achieved. The trouble was that they were unwilling to define what they meant by the Palestinian problem and who would decide how, by whom and when it would be resolved. The Arabs showed no interest in discussing "agreed, secure and recognized" boundaries as stated in 242. In order to ensure that Jarring kept flying, Israel provided him with stacks of documents, formulated by the master formula-tor Abba Eban, in which he was given a series of questions that he was asked to pose to the Arab leaders. This tactic was basically to keep Jarring going from one capital to another lest he despair and return his mandate to the Security Council which could adopt a more serious anti-Israel resolution calling for an immediate and total withdrawal. Jarring, for the time being, agreed to play along with this tactic which, as expected, bore no fruit. In the meantime, Israel deepened its hold in the territories under the overall responsibility of Defense Minister Moshe Dayan.

While the diplomatic motions were moving along at a slow pace, the Secretary General of Mapai faced other and more urgent and cogent issue that demanded immediate decisions. The Six Days War had weakened Mapai considerably, the main victim being Levi Eshkol. He had performed his task with much devotion and prepared the IDF for war, but the fruits of victory were credited to Dayan, and indirectly to Yitzhak Rabin. The Rafi party that had a well-oiled public relations apparatus made sure that Dayan's name was stressed while Eshkol's role in the years prior to the war and in some of the decisions he made during the war was minimized. True, Dayan did play a certain role in the war, he did raise public moral, made some changes in the operational plans and gave certain directives during the war, but he had not been a party to the building of the force since he left the army as chief of staff in early 1958. The ungrateful public cheered Dayan and Rabin, pitied Eshkol and never forgave Golda for the role she played in attempting to prevent bringing Dayan to the cabinet. Golda realized that it was not only Mapai that needed rehabilitation, but all the labor parties and the entire labor

movement in Israel. An entirely new political reality now prevailed. The boycott on Herut's participation in the coalition was broken and Begin enjoyed much popularity as a cabinet minister. The prime minister was too tired, too embittered and above all busy with foreign affairs and defense to devote time and energy to deal with the affairs of Mapai or the Alignment. He preferred to leave all this in the capable and experienced hands of the secretary general.

Golda fully understood that the conditions that prevailed prior to the war, the panic that gripped some of the leaders of the party, the politics of the street and the absence of orderly decision-making procedures could only intensify the demand to put Moshe Dayan at the head of the national unity government, some of it due to Eshkol's declining health. This, Golda and her close allies Aranne, Sapir, and Sherf were determined to prevent at all costs. They strengthened the bonds with Achdut Ha'avodah in a joint effort to block Dayan's way to the top.

A parallel move was undertaken by Rafi's leaders. During the weeks that preceded the war, Shimon Peres had already hinted broadly that he would be willing to dissolve Rafi if that contributed to national unity. After the great victory, there were growing doubts among Rafi's leaders of the wisdom to maintain Rafi as a separate party. Dayan was too busy with defense and running the territories and showed no interest in the affairs of the party. Peres saw no great advantage in their continued sitting in the opposition benches in the Knesset, in spite of their being part of the government of national unity. Being a very pragmatic politician, Peres understood that now was the right time to return to the fold of Mapai in a respectable manner, not by crawling back but as an equal partner with full rights that was making its contribution to the unity of the labor movement. Three days after the cease-fire, on June 13, 1967, Rafi's Secretariat accepted Peres's proposal to inform Mapai of its readiness to rejoin its ranks. The only one who refused was the man of principles—Ben-Gurion.

In an effort to persuade Ben-Gurion not to block the party unity, Golda met with him on August 1, 1967, at the "King David" hotel for a long, highly emotional and bitter conversation. This was their first meeting since 1966. On August 3, she reported extensively on this meeting to Mapai's leadership and said that Ben-Gurion persisted in calling Eshkol a liar, a man devoid of any morals, a danger to Israel. But Ben-Gurion did not reject the idea of party unification and told his colleagues in Rafi that they could do as they saw fit. He would never sit in the same government with Eshkol, Yaacov Shimshon Shapira and their likes, people who two years earlier accused him of neo-fascist tendencies. In a blatant manner, Dayan declared that Rafi was returning to Mapai essentially to remove Eshkol and his friends, meaning Golda, Sapir and Aranne. But his words apparently made little impression on these three, who were convinced that with the help of Achdut Ha'avodah they would be able to control Rafi.

Peres initiated a meeting with Golda Meir and proposed that Rafi merge with Mapai, a suggestion she welcomed with open arms. But as the talks with Rafi and Achdut Ha'avodah dragged on, and Mapam, also invited to join the new Labor Party, wavered whether they wanted to dissolve their separate left-wing party, Golda decided not to waste any more time and momentum and in mid September she proposed to set up the united party and hand over the outstanding issues to the authorized bodies in the three parties to resolve them. She had not forgotten the bitter residue of the past, but the temptation that she would achieve the dream that eluded Berl Katznelson and Ben-Gurion: to bring about the unity of the labor movement, was too big to forego. The price that was asked was not exorbitant. At the end of October 1967, Mapai Central Committee approved the merger, Rafi did so in late December and on January 21, 1968, Golda presided over the inaugural meeting of the Israel Labor Party. The party now numbered 54 Knesset members, the largest faction in the Knesset. It was agreed that the three parts would each retain its administrative autonomy. Mapai would receive 57.5% representation in the new party's governing institutions while Rafi and Achdut Ha'avodah would each get 21.5%. It was very easy for Rafi to dissolve itself. It had no economic assets, no kibbutzim or moshavim, no daily newspaper (although the independent Ha'aretz was seen as their mouthpiece). As for Achdut Ha'avodah, which had been in existence since 1954, the process was more complicated, but its leaders knew that together with the veteran leaders of Mapai they would overcome Dayan and Peres, and they were right. Dayan never became prime minister before his death in 1981, Peres became prime minister in 1984 under totally different circumstances than he would have dared to dream about in 1968—after seven years of Likud rule, a divisive war in Lebanon, an almost ruined Israeli economy and serious splits in Israeli society. He would attempt to heal much of this during his very successful and popular presidency (2007–2014). On February 8, Golda was elected secretary general of the new party, she had two deputies: Shimon Peres from Rafi and Avraham Gevelber representing Achdut Ha'avodah. The party began to prepare for the Knesset elections due to be held in October 1969. A month earlier, she was furious to read that her old ally, Isser Harel, announced his resignation from Mapai and joined a new political party that consisted of what was left of Rafi and was headed by Ben-Gurion. They won four seats in the 1969 elections and soon dissolved.

The union of the Labor movement exacted its price in a totally different sphere and was expressed by the fact that the young Labor Party, in order to preserve its fragile unity, decided not to decide on the issue of the future of the occupied territories. This was the beginning of a political immobilism that would characterize Israel's foreign policy from then on. At its base was the subject of the territorial integrity of what became known as Greater Israel. A central group in

Achdut Ha'avodah thought that Israel must retain all the territories it won in the recent war and settle them as fast as possible in order to prevent them from being transferred to hostile hands. Among those who supported rapid settlement were members of the Movement for Greater Israel, some of whose leaders came from Mapai and included such figures as the national poet Nathan Alterman, Eliezer Livneh, Chaim Yachil and other prominent figures of the kibbutz and moshav movement in addition to the Achdut Ha'avodah veterans who were led by their revered leader Yitzhak Tabenkin. Yigal Allon, being more pragmatic and realistic, drew up a plan immediately after the war whose main points were the return of 70 % of the West Bank to Jordan in the framework of an Israel-Jordan peace treaty. Israel would retain the Jordan Valley, greater Jerusalem and a land link between Jerusalem and the Negev. This meant that the heavily populated urban parts of the West Bank would be returned to Jordan and the physical link would be through a corridor in the Jericho area. Allon argued that his plan would provide the right answer to maintaining Israel as a democratic Zionist state with a Jewish majority, ensure its security and reach a peace treaty with Jordan. The plan was discussed by the government but was never approved and was rejected at once by Jordan. The United States was shown the plan and its reaction consisted of two words: totally unacceptable. America was not prepared to do anything that would harm King Hussein. Hussein, who met with Allon in London in April 1968, told him: "You are prepared to give Egypt and Syria back everything and to me only 70 %."<sup>32</sup>

The Rafi leadership focused around Dayan who claimed that Israel must retain all the territories until such time as negotiations leading to peace treaties would commence. He voiced his objections to the Allon Plan and declared that he would torpedo any process that would lead to a return of territories that would not be part of a peace process leading to peace treaties. Dayan did not have much trust in the Arab leaders to be prepared any time soon to negotiate with Israel. He then coined the slogan: "I'd rather have Sharm el-Sheikh without peace than peace without Sharm el-Sheikh." Views in Mapai were split. The group known as the "Hawks", headed by Golda Meir, said that Israel could publicly announce its readiness to return land even before the start of negotiations, so as not to lose the moral and material support of the United States, to preserve Israel's moral standing in the world, and above all to avoid a prolonged occupation of over a million hostile Palestinians living under a military government against their will. All this could eventually corrupt Israeli society. Golda's position was simple: "I have determined for myself a number of milestones. Firstly what we can never give up: not Jerusalem, not Golan, not Gaza and not Sharm el-Sheikh. Even when

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<sup>32</sup> Melman, *Hostile Partnership*, pp. 71–72.

peace will prevail, we cannot give up borders that could put us in an inferior position vis-a-vis our neighbours. I want such borders that, if we shall be attacked, we shall triumph. I want a Jewish state with a Jewish majority. The Allon plan is attractive because it does not contain a large part of the Arab population.”<sup>33</sup>

The unyielding and uncompromising stand of the Arabs helped all those in Israel who claimed there was no urgent need to take a decision. On April 20, 1968, in the course of discussion in the Political Committee of the Labor Party on the future of the territories, two proposals were tabled, one by Allon and the other by Dayan. Golda supported Allon’s plan and said: “Since I agree with Yigal’s plan and since I do not think we have to enter into a detailed discussion with him (i. e. Jordan’s King Hussein), I would say to him: you must know one thing—we have no desire or intention to take away your population. It will remain yours.” The next day, April 21, 1968, Golda summarized the following guidelines in the Labor Party Secretariat:

It is better not to have stormy arguments among us. Let us concentrate on those things that exist and we must do them. The moment will surely come when there will be a need for a major debate, let us do it each with his own truth. But at this moment—as we are—we have to strengthen the hands of those dealing with policies and security so that our situation will be strong, until we shall come to the time when there will be a need for discussion, clarification and conclusions.<sup>34</sup>

This policy was unanimously adopted. In October 1968, the Israel cabinet decided to rescind its decision of June 19, 1967, on the return of the Golan Heights to Syria and the Sinai Peninsula to Egypt in return for full-fledged peace treaties. Eshkol had to admit that he could not offer a revolutionary Israeli peace plan because he had to take into account the position of Rafi on his right and Achdut Ha’avodah on his left.<sup>35</sup>

Several weeks earlier, in July 1968, Golda announced her intention to resign as secretary general of the Israel Labor Party and handed Eshkol a letter of resignation. The reasons she gave were “personal”. There were rumors at the time that the main reason for this step was her objection to a decision of the Labor Party Central Committee on June 27, 1968, to adopt secret balloting for positions in the party’s institutions and local authorities. She had always been opposed to secret ballots, feeling that leaders had to be elevated because of seniority, performance and merit and because they were able to garner support among the party rank

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<sup>33</sup> Agress, Golda, p. 130.

<sup>34</sup> Labor Party Secretariat, 21 April 1968.

<sup>35</sup> Yossi Beilin, *The Price of Unity—The Labor Party Until the Yom Kippur War*, Ramat Gan, 1985, p. 49.

and file and leadership. She thought this was too “American” and reminded her of the primary system which she abhorred.

Once again there was a parade of delegations beating a path to her doorway to appease the angry goddess. The Secretariat devoted two meetings to her resignation, on July 11 and August 18. She stated:

I have come to the conclusion that I can no longer continue in my post as party secretary. I have written to the prime minister who will surely remember that after the elections, when comrades asked me to work in the party—something that did not exactly fit with my plans, I was told it was for a short time. Someone said half a year. Someone more realistic said a year. Anyhow, two-and-a-half years have gone by and I see no possibility to carry on. I shall terminate my post on 1 August. I have asked that the prime minister and other comrades not to waste their time and energy and do what is usually done in such cases—press. What I have decided is final and anything that will be said here—with all due respect and esteem to what will be said and who will say it—I will not under any circumstances change my position.

But as though to allay their fears that she was entering a political convent, she added a broad hint:

As long as I will not be removed from the party institutions in which I am now a member, I have no intention of leaving them. I will remain in the Knesset until the end of its term. There will be no change in my party activity, apart from the fact that as of 1 August I shall no longer be party secretary... My final wish is that there will be no discussion, that my words be taken exactly as I said them. I have gone a long way in the movement. I do not recall that I ever violated the party's decisions. I have never thought that I deserve anything. I received much more than I deserved. But I deserve to end this position in the movement with you accepting my decision.<sup>36</sup>

She was very happy to hand over the job to Pinchas Sapir who also wanted some time out from the cabinet, as he was also unhappy with the way things were going. He remained as minister without portfolio in the Eshkol cabinet. Why did she decide to leave? To close friends she said that she really wanted to be free of the daily grind of running the party and focus more on certain key issues such as consolidating the party in time for the coming elections. She also mentioned that she would continue to be involved in negotiations between the Labor Party and Mapam for the creation of a large Labor bloc in the next Knesset. She also mentioned her age. She was past seventy and wanted to spend more time with her family. In a media interview, she said the time had come to bestow greater responsibility on younger people. This time it sounded somewhat hollow. She probably was fed up with the petty politics that characterized the first few months of the

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<sup>36</sup> Agress, Golda, pp. 128–129.



united party. It was obvious that Eshkol's days were numbered and there began a rush to determine his successor. Perhaps she wanted time out to rest and gather her physical and emotional strength for the next job—that of prime minister. In the fall of 1968, she was again resting in Switzerland. Sapir came to see her and declared that after Eshkol's death, she would become prime minister. She did not argue. Sapir then asked for Eban's support and told him that Golda would be a temporary prime minister since she too was ill, and all this in order to prevent a confrontation between Allon and Dayan for the top job. The attitude of Mapai's leaders to Dayan was well known. Less known was their attitude to Allon, who did not enjoy their special respect. Eshkol once called him "light cavalry". They did not think he was made of prime ministerial timber. It was understood by the party elders that Golda would agree to serve as prime minister for an interim period, provided there be no change in the composition of the cabinet. She did not want to start her stint as prime minister with lengthy and protracted negotiations to form a new cabinet.<sup>37</sup>

Eban tried to prevent her candidacy and suggested Allon. Golda knew well of Eban's futile efforts to deny her the premiership and never forgave him. Years later, after she resigned in 1974, a colleague came to see her and informed her that Eban wanted to be prime minister. Her response was brutal: "Of which country," she sarcastically asked. Eban knew well that as prime minister, Golda would run Israel's foreign policy, and that his position, weak in any case, due to the existence of a government of national unity with Dayan, Begin and Galili playing key roles in foreign policy, would further erode. Allon realized that under the present circumstances he had no chance of becoming prime minister and supported her candidacy. Rafi leaders said bluntly that if Allon became prime minister, they would secede from the cabinet and party. Dayan preferred Golda, so did Tabenkin. To bolster Allon's position and no more than that, he was appointed on July 2, 1968, minister for immigrant absorption, a marginal ministry. But as a consolation prize, he was given the empty title of deputy prime minister. He was replaced as labor minister by Yosef Almogi of Rafi. This move angered the Rafi leaders who were not consulted on both appointments.

In the coming months, Golda traveled in the party branches, went abroad on fund-raising missions and entered into a holding pattern. The Israeli media had already written her off. Few knew that the succession was a done deal. On February 8, 1969, Eshkol gave an interview to the American weekly "Newsweek" in which he stated openly that Israel had no interest in the populated areas of Judea and Samaria such as Nablus and Jenin. But he stressed that the Jordan

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<sup>37</sup> Beilin, *Price of Unity*, p. 52; Eban, *Autobiography*, p. 461.

River must be Israel's defense border and the IDF must remain along the River Jordan. The idea of the River Jordan as a security border would be raised with the Palestinians on many occasions in the future, including the negotiations between Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and the President of the Palestinian Authority Mahmud Abbas in 2008. In the "Newsweek" interview, Eshkol also spoke of Israeli withdrawal from parts of the West Bank in return for peace. That was the last interview he ever gave. At its conclusion, he suffered another heart attack and was rushed home, from where he never emerged again. The opposition proposed a vote of nonconfidence in the government. Allon defended its position. By then Eshkol was no longer interested. He knew that his successor was already chosen. Friends heard him mutter in Yiddish: "That Klapfe (shrew) is sitting in her home and waiting." Few knew how close to death he was and when he died in the early morning hours of February 26, 1969, the news came as a lightning bolt to the unaware Israeli public.

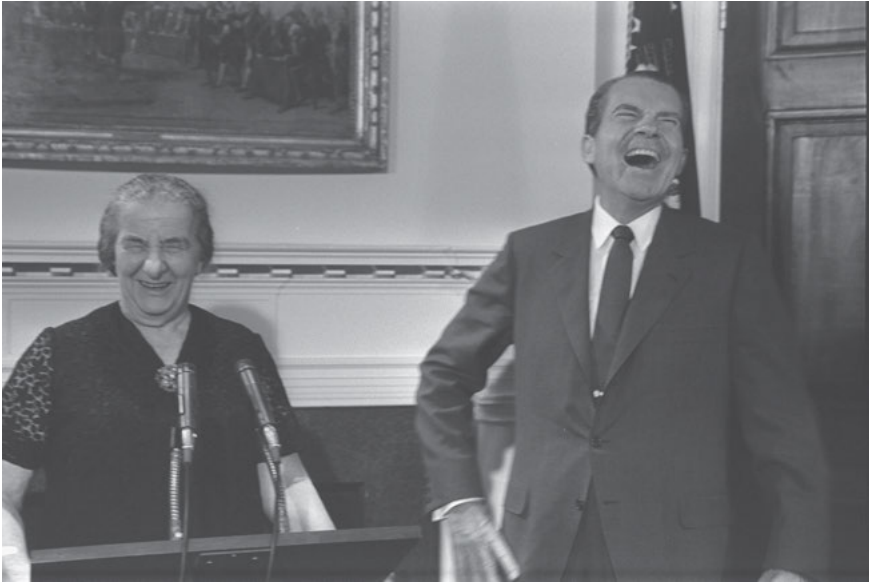
## Figures



**Fig. 1:** Celebrating Ben-Gurion's 85th Birthday. From left Golda Meir, Rachel Shazar, David Ben-Gurion and Zalman Shazar. President's residence, Jerusalem, October 1971.



**Fig. 2:** Golda Meir reviews IDF Women's soldiers guard of honor, Lod International Airport, September 1969.



**Fig. 3:** “We have a friend in the White House”. Golda Meir shares a joke with President Nixon, September 1969.



**Fig. 4:** Golda Meir flanked by UN Mediator Gunnar Jarring on the left and Foreign Minister Abba Eban on the right. Jerusalem, December 1970.



**Fig. 5:** Sharing a joke with Anwar Sadat in the Knesset. Shimon Peres looks on. November 1977.



**Fig. 6:** Tending a reception in the Knesset to four African Presidents who tried to make peace. January 1971.



**Fig. 7:** Greeting a close friend and admirer Willy Brandt, June 1973.



**Fig. 8:** Visiting the troops on the Golan Heights, November 1973.



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**Fig. 10:** Greeting her well-wishers with her favorite general Yitzhak Rabin.





**Fig. 11:** Golda Meir attending a rally in support of Soviet Jewry, March 1970.



**Fig. 12:** Trudging in the sand in Egypt with General Ariel Sharon, October 1973.



**Fig. 13:** In the sands of Egypt with General Avraham Adan, October 1973.



**Fig. 14:** Escorted by General Shmuel Gonen at IDF Southern Command Headquarters, October 1973.



**Fig. 15:** Official portrait as prime minister, March 1969.



**Fig. 16:** Addressing the Knesset.



**Fig. 17:** Greeting an African leader (with a perennial cigarette). Jerusalem 1971.



**Fig. 18:** Official reception at the White House Lawn, September 1969.



**Fig. 19:** State dinner tended by Patricia and Richard Nixon at the White House, September 1969.



**Fig. 20:** Reviewing an IDF guard of honor.



**Fig. 21:** An official reception at the President of Israel residence in Jerusalem, on her right are Yigal Allon and Yisrael Galili.





**Fig. 22:** The two strong men in Golda Meir's cabinet- Yisrael Galili and Moshe Dayan.

## 16 Madam Prime Minister (1969–1973)

Levi Eshkol died in the early hours of the morning on February 26, 1969. Golda was informed by telephone at her home in Ramat Aviv by Eshkol's secretary Levanah Habusha. Her response was, "Oy Gevald." She left at once to Jerusalem. Her first stop was at the home of the prime minister on Ben Maimon Street, where she tried her best to comfort the stunned widow. From there she went directly to Galili's office on the first floor of the Prime Minister's Office. On the third floor of that very building, the cabinet was meeting to discuss the funeral arrangements and what would happen until the selection of the next prime minister. According to Basic Law Government, the death of the prime minister entailed the resignation of the entire cabinet and the appointment of an acting prime minister to deal mainly with urgent matters. When the cabinet session was over, the Labor Party ministers descended to Galil's office. Among them were Sapir, Eban, Allon, Dayan, Sherf and Shapira. The decision-making process was relatively swift and lasted less than two hours. It was decided that deputy prime minister Yigal Allon would be the acting prime minister until the party organs would convene to select the next prime minister. The participants in this meeting had no doubt who would be Eshkol's successor.<sup>1</sup>

That evening, the Foreign Ministry spokesman hosted a number of foreign correspondents for dinner. Others gathered at the next table as guests of the Director of the Government Press Office in Jerusalem. The Foreign Ministry spokesman David Rivlin had been briefed earlier by a senior Foreign Ministry official and was told to convince the foreign correspondents that the next prime minister of Israel would be Yigal Allon. The "Washington Post" correspondent Al Friendly reported in that spirit to his highly influential newspaper. The "New York Times" correspondent James Feron was more careful and accepted the advice of the head of the Government Press Office who told him to put his money on the "Milwaukee Braves". The hint was clear. He could safely tell his readers that the next prime minister would

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<sup>1</sup> For some of the main sources for the period of Golda Meir as prime minister see Goldstein, Golda; David Shaham, *Israel—50 Years*, Tel Aviv, 1998, pp. 304–367; Beilin, *Price of Unity*; Pinchas Yurman, *Between Two Wars*, Tel Aviv, 1982; Dan Margalit, *Message from the White House, The Rise and Fall of the Government of National Unity*, Tel Aviv, 1971; Mordechai Naor, *The War After the War*, Tel Aviv, 1973; Tsoref, ed., *Golda Meir*; Burkett, *Golda*; Blema Steinberg, *Women in Power*. See also interviews about Golda in the Golda Meir Library, University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee. Interviewees: Shulamit Allony, Yehuda Avner, Hanan Einor, Lou Kadar, Golda Meir, Regina Medzini, Tamar Eshel, Sarah Rehavi-Meir, Arie Rath, Eli Mizrachi, and Zeev Sherf. See other interviews in the Institute of Contemporary Jewry of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem with Lou Boyar, Moshe David, and Lou Kadar.

be Golda Meir. When Golda heard about this on the next day, she was furious and saw this as an effort to derail her candidacy. She attributed this to Eban and his senior officials. At this stage, she did not respond. She would have ample opportunity to get even with Eban, Gideon Rafael and their colleagues. Two days later, she attended Eshkol's funeral on Mount Herzl, but decided not to participate in the formal talks that were held with members of the American delegation to the funeral, headed by the attorney general and close friend of Richard Nixon, Robert Finch. Allon and Eban led these discussions that focused on the need to reassure the Americans there would be no significant change in Israel's policies.

The Israeli media understood quickly that Golda would be the next prime minister. They contacted her to learn that she was not the candidate. In spite of her innocent reaction, the editors realized that her candidacy had been a done deal long before Eshkol died. In her memoirs, she repeated the story that she was contacted by the editor of "Ma'ariv", the largest circulation newspaper, who told her that she would succeed Eshkol. She rightly decided not to react and said that the party had to go through the accepted moves and there was no need for hasty statements on her part. The media claimed that hers was a compromise candidacy to prevent a struggle between Dayan and Allon, a struggle that could wreck the party that was barely a year old with many open wounds. Golda, they wrote, would be a temporary prime minister until the coming Knesset elections due to be held at the end of October 1969. Her role would be to assure that there were no further shocks, that there would be continuity and above all—to ensure that the reins of power would be retained by the party veterans. She was their last hope. In her memoirs, she added that she had never planned to be prime minister, and in fact she never sought any office at this time. The truth of course was totally different. She had been in the running since 1953. Ben-Gurion saw her as a worthy candidate for many years. Both Sherf and Sapir had discussed the position with her in the past two years. Her explanation that "I became prime minister simply because it was like this" is highly unconvincing and far too simple.<sup>2</sup>

There is little doubt that she wanted the job. This would be her crowning achievement, the highest position sought by any politician. She believed that she could carry out the responsibility to the best of her ability and that would grant her the chance to lead Israel towards a better future. Furthermore, she did not think that Dayan could be prime minister, certainly not after his repeated proclamations that Rafi returned to the Labor Party to oust the veterans. She was not fully convinced, and rightly so, that Dayan really wanted to bear the highest responsibility. She had known Dayan for decades and knew that when it came to a crunch,

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<sup>2</sup> Meir, *My Life*, p. 275.

he would not fight for his views and tended to make compromises. She did not accept his life style that included much womanizing and meals in fancy restaurants surrounded by his cronies. She was also unhappy with the many interviews he granted to the local and foreign press (some of them for pay). To this very day there are many doubts if Dayan ever really wanted to be number one. He probably preferred to be number two in the shadow of Ben-Gurion, Eshkol, Golda and later Begin. She did not trust Yigal Allon and feared he was not strong enough to assert himself and his views and that he suffered from the Dayan Syndrom: in order to demonstrate that he was better than Dayan, he made a number of serious errors of judgment. In Passover of 1968, he offered weapons to Rabbi Levinger who headed a group of settlers who arrived in Hebron. She knew that in spite of his charm, outgoing personality, his concise thinking and his unswerving loyalty to the Labor Party and its ideology, he was not made of prime ministerial timber. His biographer, Anita Shapira, wrote the assessment in her biography “Yigal Allon—The Spring of His Life” that “Ben-Gurion, Eshkol, Golda Meir, Zalamn Aranne, Mordechai Namir, Pinchas Sapir on occasion made snide remarks about Allon, as someone whose personality did not fit his ambition. They cast doubt in his credibility, his leadership capacity, his loyalty to his colleagues in the cabinet. They thought he lacked personal strength, decision-making ability.” Another possible candidate was Pinchas Sapir, but he announced immediately after Eshkol’s death that he did not consider himself a candidate. He knew his limitations. No one took Eban’s candidacy seriously. She was the only one left.

At the end of the mourning period for Eshkol, the Israel Labor Party began the usual rituals of convincing her to take on the job. From various sources she heard that she was the only candidate. All she could do was smile. Every one of the leaders fulfilled his traditional role. The old-timers made the pilgrimage to her Ramat Aviv apartment to ask her not to create undue problems and difficulties. Their tactics were quite transparent—all they asked was that she consider becoming prime minister for a period of seven-and-a-half months until the elections, and “then we shall see.” Dayan was not among those who called on her. There was no need for much convincing. At this time, she needed two things before she would give a positive answer—one was approval from her family, and they were quite thrilled with the idea. Sarah and Zecharia came from Revivim and persuaded her that there was no other way and she must give a positive reply. Menachem and Aya, who were in the United States at the time, strongly supported this view. They knew that their mother was very much interested in the highest position her party and country could offer her.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Meir, *My Mother Golda Meir*, pp. 183–185.

The second requirement was a clean medical bill of health. Could she at 71, suffering from phlebitis, migraines, blood circulation problems with a history of blood clots in her legs dating back to 1948, and above all cancer of the lymphatic glands, although in remission since 1965, undertake this responsibility? There was a saying in Israel at the time that any medical student who could identify her ailments would pass his examinations with flying colors. Her doctors determined that medically she was fit. Her senses were acute, her eyesight and hearing were good, the medications she took did not influence her judgment and behavior, but she continued to chain-smoke (“I will not die young”, was her stock answer to those who questioned this habit). She drank scores of coffee cups a day and did not exercise. Knowing the magnitude of the responsibility, her doctors concluded that she was fit. They also knew their patient and her willpower and ability to suffer pain. They rightly estimated that if she would lead a normal life, she would be able to fulfill the task. Few thought at the time that she would hold out five-and-a-half years. Had they known that she would resign five years later they may have suggested that she limit her term. Her doctors, like many Israelis, saw her new position as a temporary one. They could promise nothing but did encourage her to assume the post. And here lay the tragedy.

They could not know that Golda had reached the pinnacle when she was already tired due to her age, exhausted from the many struggles of recent years, and lacking the excitement and enthusiasm that characterised her during her term as minister of labor. Few suspected that she was doing her party, family and close friends a favor by agreeing to serve as an interim prime minister. The price would be paid by the State of Israel. She functioned well, but she was old, cautious, conservative, closed to new ideas, to new experiments in both domestic politics and foreign affairs. Her greatest tragedy was that she attained the premiership when she was 71 and not twenty years earlier. Outwardly, she seemed to be in the best of health, a model of power and authority, but there were many times when she again felt her old inferiority complex. She covered up for these doubts by exuding sheer power and assurance that her way was the only way. Because of her age, she also tended to see things in black and white. The absence of a broad education was covered up by rigidity and insisting on certain principles that may have been good for a different era, but were no longer suitable to the new Israeli generation of the 70's of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. She was not examined by doctors whose specialty was geriatrics, and even had she been tested, it would have been difficult to determine if she would have problems adjusting to a new world.

However, the party was not interested in these issues. The party wanted Golda to be at the helm of the government, and if problems arose, she would have the help of Sapir, Allon, Galili and Shapira. And so, on March 7, 1969, the

Labor Party Central Committee voted for her candidacy. 70 supported, no one was opposed. Only the Rafi members spoiled the party by abstaining. Among them were Dayan, Peres and Navon. This angered her immensely: couldn't they overcome the wounds of the past, she wondered. Two days later, President Shazar charged her with forming the next cabinet, which she did with a breakneck speed. One of the conditions she laid before her party when she agreed to take the job was that there would be no changes in the makeup of the cabinet, so there were no special problems. On March 17, she presented her cabinet to the Knesset and won the trust of all the parties that made up the Government of National Unity. Ben-Gurion abstained and after the vote explained: "Golda Meir can be prime minister, but we cannot forget that she lent her hand to something immoral". She did not react although she included this remark in her memoirs. His remark wounded her. Couldn't Ben-Gurion rise to the occasion and be generous? Golda's speech was written by Yisrael Galili who would now be her main speech writer. The speech indicated how she saw the task and what policies she would pursue at least until the elections. She would act very cautiously, would seek to win the trust of her ministers and strengthen her own position in the country. This meant that in the key issues that faced Israel, there would be no new ideas or directions and she would do her utmost to abstain from embarking in new directions. She did not even ask her aides, all of whom were left over from the Eshkol era, to prepare a new national assessment for her and propose new courses to help her lead Israel in solving acute problems. There would be no 100 days of grace. She did not want to foment arguments, conflicts and unnecessary rifts with her allies and foes alike at this stage. In fact, she decided to accept what her friends offered her—an interim prime ministership. As she had no intention to assume office in order to split Israeli society, the cabinet and her own party would avoid the introduction of new ideas to the political arena. This was contrary to her character. She had not forgotten the trauma of May 1967, when she was accused of thwarting the will of the people when she tried to prevent Dayan's entry into the cabinet. She was convinced that she understood the national mood and she would try to unite the nation and party under her leadership. She would not give Begin an excuse to leave the cabinet or Dayan and his Rafi friends to abandon the Labor Party, and all of them to unite against it.

Within a month after she entered her office, she was nicely ensconced in the Office of the Prime Minister, Building Number 3 in the Government Compound in Jerusalem. The process of her assuming the position was smooth, respectable, and with no shocks. Once again, as she did when she became minister of labor in 1949 and foreign minister in 1956, she left intact all the senior officials, at least until the elections. Several weeks later, public opinion polls that three months earlier had rated her at 3% as suitable of being prime minister, now gave her

more than 82% as most suitable for this position. What brought about this dramatic change in the Israeli public opinion? The Israeli political system does not allow for an orderly transfer of power when there is a change in the office of the prime minister. In America, there is a long transition period, but not so in Israel. In her case, there was in fact no orderly transfer of power, and there was no need for that. She was fully aware of what was happening due to the regular briefings given to her by Galili and Sherf. She knew exactly how a prime minister functions in Israel. Since there was no real struggle for Eshkol's succession, it was relatively easy for her to enter the post: Eshkol's shoes were never too large for her. Luckily, she did not have to enter the shoes of Ben-Gurion. She knew that Ben-Gurion had the rare ability and sense to identify historic opportunities and make the right decisions. She was afraid of such decisions, but realized the job had to be fulfilled and she would do so to the best of her ability. So with no pomp and special ceremonies, the day after she was sworn in as prime minister, she walked into her office, put on her desk the photograph of Berl, added some books to the book case, including Reuven Grossman's "Parchments of Fire", and began to run the country. In the early months as prime minister, she resided in a rented apartment in the Beit Hakerem section in Jerusalem since Eshkol's widow took her time vacating the official residence of the prime minister. Several months later, she moved into the beautiful home in Rehavia in Jerusalem where she would reside until June 1974.

Even in the early days after assuming office, she already demonstrated her character—an unflinching and deep belief in the righteousness of her way, an absolute assurance in the justice of her causes, positions and principles, total identification with her mission and with the state, personal responsibility for everything happening in the state and in the party. She showed her mettle—a dominant personality, with an iron will, often assertive, domineering, authoritarian, and aggressive as she clung to her goals. She also became known for less positive traits—often querulous, inviting and relishing conflicts, seeing the world in black and white, doctrinaire, rigid, inflexible. Few paid attention to the fact that she also sought moderation, compromise and appeasement of the various elements that made up her government and party. She showed little interest in public opinion polls and in ratings, although she read the daily Israeli newspapers and asked her assistants to clip items about her or Israel which appeared in major foreign publications. Technically she was an interim prime minister. But several weeks after becoming prime minister, it became clear to her and to people around her and the nation at large that she could handle the office very successfully. She began to like the job and probably decided at that early stage to carry on after the elections. The first clue to indicate this was her decision to extend invitations to two officials from the Foreign Ministry days to join her team. One

was Simcha Dinitz who would be head of her bureau and senior political adviser, and Lou Kadar as her personal assistant. She would not have asked them to come back to Jerusalem had she assumed this would be for a very short time. Several weeks after assuming office, a new image was created of the cabinet and the one who headed it. Israel now spoke in one voice, that of the prime minister. Differences of opinion did not disappear, but they were not aired publicly. The ministers did not want to antagonize the prime minister, certainly not before the elections. The Labor Party ministers were very circumspect with her, knowing their political future would be determined by Golda. Menachem Begin, always a gentleman, showed her much respect and found common language with Golda on foreign affairs and defense matters.

In her early public speeches, she was able to ignite the imagination of many Israelis who longed for a strong leader after the luckless final years of Eshkol. They did not have to be reminded who Golda was. A typical expression of the mood of the country was provided by Lt. Colonel Jonathan (Yoni) Netanyahu in a letter to his parents: “By the way, what do you think about our new prime minister? Here in Israel, to our great surprise, she was revealed as a super star. I am among those who support her, too. She is much more decisive and practical than the late Eshkol. She does not hesitate to make decisions and runs the affairs of state with a much stronger hand than her predecessor”.<sup>4</sup> He correctly reflected the appreciation of the Israeli public.

One of the first interviews she granted to a foreign correspondent was to the American journalist Stewart Alsop. In the course of their conversation, Alsop claimed that Israel was obsessed with what he called the Massada Complex. Later she said that he accused her of suffering from the “Massada Complex...soon they will say that we have a Holocaust Complex.” Two years later, he said that Golda had added that “we have Pogroms Complexes, a Hitler Complex” as well. The “Pogrom Complex” she also mentioned during the meeting in the Vatican with Pope Paul VI in January 1973. In her memoirs, she devoted much space to this encounter. He “started it by telling me that he found hard to accept the fact that the Jews—who, of all people, should have been capable of mercy towards others because they have suffered so terribly themselves—had behaved so harshly in their own country.” In her memoirs she cited her reply: “Your Holiness, do you know what my own very earliest memory is? It is waiting for a pogrom in Kiev. Let me assure you that my people know all about real ‘harshness’ and also that we learned all about real mercy when we were being led to the gas chambers of the Nazis.”

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4 Benjamin and Ido Netanyahu, eds., *Letters of Yoni Netanyahu*, Tel Aviv, 1979, p. 185.



As soon as she entered office, she decided to postpone the negotiations with Jarring and the representatives of the four powers in the Security Council aimed at seeking a solution to the ongoing crisis in the Middle East. The idea originated with the Americans and was designed to involve the four superpowers in seeking a solution, or at least to assure that some of the powers, mostly the Soviet Union, would not torpedo the efforts of the Western powers. She proclaimed that the powers would not dictate to Israel what her policy ought to be and in plain language she told the Israelis to expect tough times, both along the Suez Canal front and along the eastern borders. In the Canal, fire was resumed by the Egyptians on March 8 in what became known as the War of Attrition. On the Jordanian cease-fire line, there was an intensification of infiltration from the East Bank of the river as well as constant shooting, occasionally by Jordanian artillery. In the domestic arena, she came out vehemently against strikes in essential public services and announced that she was going to oppose unjustified pay increase. At this point, she seemed to have forgotten that she was also a leader of a labor movement. She now saw herself as a national leader. Soon her party realized that it was headed by a tough no-nonsense leader who had now decided to stay in office a number of years and not months. She had succeeded in providing Israel with a new image, that of a beleaguered nation led by a strong leader who knew where it was headed. But in reality, Golda was not sure in which direction she wanted to take Israel and at this stage she was not yet sure what she wanted to achieve apart from a working cease-fire along the newly created borders. In those days, this did not occupy her mind a great deal. In any case, she may have thought, I am here temporarily, why shackle the hands of the one who may succeed me if there will be such a leader. She devoted much effort to involve her ministers in her decisions, and at the beginning she succeeded with one of the key ministers—Moshe Dayan. In his memoirs, he wrote:

When the party voted for her candidacy as prime minister I abstained. I did not see in her a personality that would open, as national and party leader, a new and a different chapter from Eshkol's. There was no other leader who had any chance of being elected. Shortly thereafter, my fears evaporated. The desk between us was clean. None of us had forgotten the past. But we both dealt with the present and thought of the future. Her work style was good. When she spoke, she looked straight and did not shy away. Our discussions were concluded by a clear summary and not half words and delays. Above all—she was not surrounded by court journalists and secretaries who were busy leaking. She had close associates and I was not among them. But in the matters of my work—there was no partition between us.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Dayan, *Milestones*, p. 553.

In the first weeks in office, she preferred to avoid making a decision about which policy to pursue, what items she would focus on and what would be her order of priorities. She already showed the traits that would characterise her five years in office as prime minister—reacting to outside events and pressures and very few national or personal initiatives. New initiatives could create problems in the fragile ruling coalition and the sensitive texture of the Labor Party. Since the chances of direct negotiations with the Arabs in general, and Egypt in particular, were almost nil, apart from Jordan (but Hussein carried little weight in pan-Arab affairs), she thought it would be a waste of time and energy and perhaps even create the illusion at home and abroad that Israel was prepared to make concessions. She needed concrete issues to deal with and did not dally with the philosophy of peace. Intellectual games were not her thing and she saw them as a waste of time. As far as she was concerned, as long as the Arab states adhered to the Khartoum formula and demanded full Israeli withdrawal to the June 5, 1967, lines and the resolution of the Palestinian problem in “all its aspects” as a minimum condition, there could be no negotiations on this basis. She wanted peace, but deep in her heart did not believe it could be achieved in her lifetime or perhaps at all.

The major issue that occupied her in the time that remained until the Knesset elections were the War of Attrition proclaimed by Nasser in March 1969, strengthening American-Israel relations that meant assuring continued supply of American weapons, political and economic support for Israel, and the war on terror, since she was responsible for both the Mossad and the General Security Services (Israel’s FBI). She left the running of Israel’s social and economic problems to the ministers responsible for them, mainly in the hands of Pinchas Sapir. She left Eban the running of Israel’s foreign relations with the rest of the world apart from the United States, which became her private domain. She did not need much convincing to understand the many dangers that would be attached to Israeli peace initiatives. However, she preferred that her views be buttressed by one who understood her mind and thinking, someone whom she highly respected—Yisrael Galili. A letter he wrote to her on June 2, 1969, is an important document that helps explain her position regarding the territories and final borders of Israel.<sup>6</sup> The letter also showed the depth of Galili’s suspicions of the United States, something that he and Golda shared since 1948. This suspicion grew over the years with the “Alpha” plan, the betrayal of 1957 and continued through the latter years of the Eisenhower administration and the dispute over Dimona with the Kennedy and Johnson administrations. Galili wrote to her that at this stage, there was no need for Israel

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<sup>6</sup> Ma’ariv, 13 May 1986.

to present a peace plan and a map of the final borders. But he thought that an internal decision should be adopted so that its absence should not be construed as a sign of weakness that could encourage some in Israel to return the West Bank to Jordan and give that kingdom a significant role in Jerusalem. He feared that in the United States there prevailed an assumption that Israel would be prepared to return to the June 5, 1967, lines, including the old international border with Egypt, in return for minor border rectifications. He added that a recent publication of an American proposal to the Russians that the future status of the Gaza Strip be discussed in talks between Israel, Egypt and Jordan could spell a major problem for Israel. He thought that Israel must insist on direct negotiations with the Arabs and was happy that Golda stressed this key element in every one of her public appearances. He was not sure, however, that this position was shared by all the ministers and that some of them might not be averse to mediations of the type Jarring was offering. Galili expressed a great deal of fear that the four powers talks in New York could lead to proposals to change Jarring's mandate or to provide Resolution 242 with a new interpretation, far less convenient to Israel. He also feared that the United States still viewed the Israel government decision regarding the Sinai and the Golan Heights of June 19, 1967 as valid, although it had been rescinded since then, as valid. He reminded her that in October 1968, Eban had been instructed to tell the Americans that the old international border between Israel and Egypt could no longer be the final peace frontier and that Israel wanted a land link to and control of Sharm el-Sheikh. He was not sure this message was fully understood in Washington. He criticized both Eban and his senior officials, whom he accused of floating various ideas that could be interpreted as if Israel's territorial demands of Egypt were not serious, ideas that were echoed by other ministers. He proposed that a number of key cabinet decisions, especially the one dated October 30, 1968, should be reaffirmed. That one stated that Israel must retain the Gaza Strip, there must be a land link from Eilat to Sharm el-Sheikh and the River Jordan would become Israel's security border in the east. He recalled that these ideas were stated by Eshkol in the Knesset on November 5, 1968, and these positions must be brought to the attention of the American government as soon as possible. Galili and Golda were afraid of a growing erosion in Israel's policy as could be seen by expressions of weakness on the part of some ministers who did not share their views and could adversely embroil Israel in her contacts with the Nixon administration. Golda adopted Galili's ideas which effectively became her policy in the coming months.

The time has come to discuss Golda Meir's foreign policy. While there have not been great and memorable achievements in the domestic arena during her term as prime minister, with the exception perhaps of a considerable growth in immigration from the Soviet Union, in the sphere of foreign relations, when we

examine the open and especially the secret Israeli and American documents that have been de-classified in recent years, it is obvious that contrary to the claim of many of Golda's detractors, she on her part did attempt to seek and advance peace, mainly with Egypt. Part of the reasons for the criticism leveled at her after her death had to do with a new perspective that opened up with the Sadat visit to Jerusalem in 1977, the signing of the Camp David Framework Accords in 1978 and the conclusion of the Israel-Egypt peace treaty in 1979, and even later on the Oslo Process that started in 1993 and the Israel-Jordan peace treaty of 1994. But Golda's policy ought to be examined from the perspective of the late 1960's and early 1970's. The second problem had to do with Golda's obsession with secrecy. She insisted on maintaining strict secrecy on some moves she made and as a result the impression had been created that she was rigid, inflexible and uncompromising. The third problem had to do with the fact that in the forty years since her death, only three former officials came out in her defense and described her efforts to achieve co-existence. One was Mordechai Gazit, the director general of the Foreign Ministry in the early 1970's and since March 1973 of the Prime Minister's Office and her senior political adviser. The second was Galili, who defended her in various publications and interviews.<sup>7</sup> The third was Simcha Dinitz, her head of bureau and top political councillor between 1969 and 1973. These three cannot be considered impartial since they all acted as her senior and closest political advisers and had to justify the advice they gave her. The fourth difficulty in analyzing her foreign policy has to do with the fact that many of her critics do not provide proof based on a very careful reading of speeches, statements, messages and interviews given mostly by Sadat and before him by Nasser and occasionally by King Hussein. The criticism is based on general and not detailed textual examination of the material that is often wrong. If we examine some events by careful and meticulous reading of the texts, it would appear that Golda had made a number of positive moves and reacted wisely to events that existed during her time as prime minister.

If there is room for criticism, it has to do with Golda's aversion to taking chances, partly in order not to cause a rift with Rafi and Achdut Ha'avodah so

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<sup>7</sup> Mordechai Gazit, *The Peace Process 1969–1973—Efforts and Contacts*, Jerusalem, 1983; Yeshayahu Ben-Porat, *Conversations*, Tel Aviv, 1981, pp. 129–170; see also Ora Armoni, *Friend and Keeper of the Secrets—Conversations with Arnan Azaryahu*, Tel Aviv, 2008; Simcha Dinitz, "The Yom Kippur War: Diplomacy of War and Peace", in *Israel Affairs*, 6 (1999), 1, pp. 104–126; Mordechai Gazit, "Egypt and Israel—Was there a Peace Opportunity Missed in 1971?", in *Journal of Contemporary History*, London, 32 (1999), pp. 97–115; William Quandt, *Peace Process: America's Diplomacy and the Arab-Israel Conflict since 1967*, Washington, 1993; Amos Shiffris, *Yisrael Galili: The Guardian of the Base*, Tel Aviv, 2010.

early after the creation of the united labor party, and therefore she usually reacted to initiatives of others and did not encourage original Israeli ideas. Her starting point was that peace would come when she could go shopping in Cairo. Israel must insist on legally binding, contractual and comprehensive peace treaties with her neighbors, with appropriate security safeguards, achieved by direct negotiations, so that if something went wrong, Israel would be able to defend herself from defensible borders.

I say that not a real war, no threat of war and no various combinations could move us from two things. First, it is impossible, and this has been tragically proven in wars, that even by huge numbers of casualties on both sides, that we cannot be moved from our land. It has been proven. But along the way it is impossible to move us from our will and belief that eventually there is no other solution but peace with us, peace with us as we are: a Jewish state, sovereign, and after all the experiments with defensible borders, borders that we shall deem secure. Although we shall do our utmost, spare no effort, that they are agreed with our neighbors, and that we can live in peace. But we want borders that we can see as secure borders, not only that, if we shall at any time be attacked, we could defend these borders, but also borders that by their very being will deter our neighbors from touching us. This is what we want.<sup>8</sup>

She was prepared to examine compromises, informal arrangements, half ways, directly or through emissaries and exchange of messages, although she never trusted vague and fuzzy oral arrangements. Such arrangements could be open to various interpretations and cause unnecessary disputes. She remembered the 1957 arrangements, she recalled Hammarskjöld's words in 1958 that he "had a basis to believe" that Israeli ships could sail through the Suez Canal. She well remembered the August 1970 cease-fire with Egypt when it was at once violated by the Egyptians who moved missiles forwards towards the Canal. Basically, she set herself a central goal: Israel will make no concessions until such time when it became evident there was a partner to negotiate with,. Israel would not propose formulations and new borders to which Israel should withdraw, lest Israel's maximal offers became the Arab's minimal demands. Above all, she rejected the notion of peace at any price. Another major point she stressed was the need to retain the friendship of the United States, to consult with that power on every major move while not giving in to external pressures, including American ones. She also refused to accept superpower guarantees:

Guarantees? With all due respect, I do not have to suspect Rogers. Let us assume that he fully believes, mainly that if the Russians will be close to us, that this is a good guarantee. Let's assume that he so believes. But that is not the fate of the United States. That is the

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<sup>8</sup> Labor Party Central Committee, 12 October 1970.

fate of the State of Israel and the Jewish People. When it comes to this, we cannot trust Rogers's planning, even when he does it bona fide. Is it not that simple? There are things that are not simple. There are things that a nation is prepared to risk for the sake of its existence, for its security. I do not know how much this will cost us. But there are things we cannot accept.

As for the defense issue. David Hacothen and others spoke of this and there is no argument among us. But there is something additional, do we have to be the only state in the world that is a sort of protectorate, that around it, on its borders, there will be a combination of Russians, Americans, Yugoslavs, Indians? And we, in the midst of this wonderful framework shall live peacefully. I do not accept this either. Even if we assume that it is possible, even if we assume that it protects our security, how do I know that if there are Russians and Americans along our borders they will always live in peace? Secure borders are a condition that under no circumstances cannot be accepted. We cannot ignore it because it could be an immediate security risk, it must be a border that deters. If Sadat is willing to try again in 5 or 10 years or even 3 years, he should not in fact be able to do so. He should see the border and remember the June 4, 1967, border that was convenient for them but they failed to cross it. The border now is more rational, more secure. Maybe they will not try, and not because we are that certain that we shall be able to withstand. When overseas visitors come to my office and begin to teach me the doctrine of modern borders, I take out "Parchments of Fire" and I tell them: if you want to learn our doctrine on one leg—here. I don't want this library to grow. Is this sentimentality? I am not afraid of this. We see ourselves obligated to ensure that there will not be added additional volume. Enough, there is no absolute security, none. But that we shall lend our hand to this—no.<sup>9</sup>

Golda's critics did not note that there was a gap, occasionally not that small, between her public statements, be it Knesset addresses or media interviews, and her secret flexibility on certain central issues that shall be examined later. It was obvious that Golda belonged to the school of doubters. She did not believe that it was possible to move from a state of total war to a state of total peace in one fell swoop, but effectively that was what she demanded. She was not enthusiastic over medium- or long-term interim arrangements, which she considered dangerous, but she did not reject them out of hand. Above all, she lacked a basic trust that the Arab leaders desired and were capable of and knew how to end the long and bloody conflict. She was terrified that even if a peace treaty was signed with an Arab leader, what would happen if he were to be assassinated.

But it is impossible to link Egypt's future, the fate of the region and the fate of peace to one person. I am speaking of countries with regimes similar to Nasser's regime in Egypt. It is well known and self evident that in free democracies regimes change and the nation survives, and no earthquake takes place. Here we are talking of a dictatorship, where there is one man who decides, who leads and manages the nation and the state according to

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<sup>9</sup> Labor Party Central Committee, 13 March 1971.

what he says. What happens when this man is either ousted by others or by higher force? It has occurred in human history and within our lifetime and we see that things never return to what they were. It does not have to be better, but there is no copying from one man to another. In a democracy, people can be replaced, the regime remains, the democratic laws remain. A more successful or a less successful man can come, but a regime is not based on one man. There is a regime, there is a procedure and this is how they live.<sup>10</sup>

But she never despaired of the possibility of negotiations:

Peace is our vital interest and most precious wish. Peace means the end of killing, an agreement on secure and recognized borders, the direction of key resources to material and spiritual creation, the expectation of cooperation and a chance of friendship among nations. Peace is the dream of parents and wives, teachers and commanders. We are all confident in our strength and the justice of our cause and yearn for peace and are ready to listen to any hint that denotes readiness for peace. Our sensitivity towards the bells of peace is also a source for a lot of sober alertness to test any indication, lest it be an illusion, lest we transform the disappointing reality with the dreamed hope, but we may also miss, God forbid, any possibility to move towards peace.

We are watching with seven eyes events in the Arab arena and are constantly studying the situation. I deeply regret that I cannot inform the Knesset today that there has been the sought-after change among the Arab leaders and there is a concrete possibility to talks instead of being forced to continue and defend ourselves from those who attack us.<sup>11</sup>

Her speeches contained an interplay of optimism and pessimism—on the one hand determination and firmness and on the other the desire to appear flexible and open to compromises. The trouble was that Arab leaders did not always know to which of her speeches they had to respond, what to take seriously and what to reject outright. Clearly she herself tended to take at face value the public utterances of Nasser, Sadat and Assad as proof of her argument. At this stage, as long as the Arab leaders did not awaken from their searing hatred of Israel and started to realize that sooner or later they would have to talk to the Jewish state directly or indirectly, there was no one to talk to, nothing to discuss and that other parties could not be trusted. In her memory, the events of 1957 and the three weeks that preceded the Six Days War in May 1967 were deeply embedded, and she had no intention to go through such events again. She also inherited a policy determined by the Eshkol government that decided in June 1967 that in return for contractual peace treaties with Egypt and Syria, Israel would be prepared to return all of Sinai and the Golan Heights. But as mentioned, this decision was annulled in October

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<sup>10</sup> Labor Party Central Committee, 12 October 1970.

<sup>11</sup> Statement in the Knesset, 29 June 1970.

1968 and replaced by one saying that there would be no withdrawal to the lines of June 5, 1967. Formally, she was not a party to the decision adopted on June 19, 1967, but she did influence the second, although formally she was not in the cabinet, but her colleagues knew her views exactly and that may have influenced them.

Another dilemma that haunted her was her contacts with King Hussein. She was committed to total secrecy and the Israeli public was not aware of her ten meetings with the Jordanian monarch and how far she was prepared to come towards him and show some flexibility in her positions. One of the important achievements of these secret ties was King Hussein's decision not to join Egypt and Syria and attack Israel on Yom Kippur 1973. Therefore, when we speak of Golda's Arab policy, we must focus on the relations with Egypt.

However, any examination of Golda's foreign policy in the Middle East must take into account the fact that she was getting on in years and was unwilling to make experiments. In this, she resembled three of her successors, Yitzhak Rabin in his first term and Yitzhak Shamir throughout his entire premiership (1983–1984 and 1986–1992) as well as Benjamin Netanyahu since 2009. It was very difficult for her, if not outright impossible, to change her views on the Arab world—concepts that were already formed and consolidated in the 1930's and were shown in the argument over the Peel Partition plan in 1937. Nasser and Sadat did nothing to bring about a change in the intuitive and instinctive evaluations that guided her throughout her premiership. What she heard from heads of states and various mediators was that there was a party to negotiate with, but when she tested this, it was obvious that there was no change in the basic attitude of the Arab leaders. Romania's attempt at mediation is a good example of this reality. In May 1972, Golda received an urgent invitation to come to Bucharest and meet with the Romanian president Nicolae Ceaucescu. The invitation was handed to her personally by the deputy foreign minister of that country. It turned out that the Romanians were under the impression that Sadat wanted to meet the prime minister of Israel. This led Ceaucescu to send her a personal invitation which she accepted at once. The Romanian president told her of the possibility he heard that Sadat was prepared to meet with her and she replied at once that she would be willing to meet Sadat or any other authorized Egyptian leader. Secret channels of communications were agreed upon in case of a positive outcome. She made sure Ceaucescu understood that he was not authorized to make any commitment on the part of Israel, apart from her agreement to discuss at any level all items on the agenda including the West Bank, as long as maximum secrecy was maintained. Several weeks later, when there was no Egyptian response to this initiative, it was evident that Sadat was not yet ready for any negotiations at any level. The initiative remained secret for a long time, although Golda did mention it in her conversation with President



Nixon on March 1, 1973. Galili was convinced that this move was part of the Egyptian cover-up in the preparations leading to the Yom Kippur War.<sup>12</sup>

Those who claim that it was her rigidity and total inflexibility that brought about the Yom Kippur War either do not know the material available or have made little or no effort to study it in detail and in depth. A typical example is the claim by Yossi Goldstein, Rabin's and Eshkol's biographer who also wrote a long biography of Golda Meir, when he wrote that her "recultrance to any movement in negotiations was one of the major reasons for the outbreak of the Yom Kippur War". If there is some justified criticism, and there is, it must be based more on her thinking and decision-making process—a process that the Israeli foreign minister described as amateurish, based on improvisation and recoil from institutionalization.<sup>13</sup> She, and some of her close associates, can be criticised for her manner of receiving and digesting information, for the fact that she did not encourage her ministers and senior officials to raise new ideas. When Eban dared do so in February 1970 and suggested that Israel propose unilaterally a cease-fire in the War of Attrition, she scolded him mercilessly. The only minister whose imaginative ideas she was ready to tolerate was Moshe Dayan.

Another factor has to be borne in mind. Between March and October 1969, Golda was seen as a temporary or interim prime minister: "until the elections and then we shall see," she had already been told by Sapir in the summer of 1968. In view of this, she was not ready to determine her own independent foreign policy. When the new cabinet was put together in December 1969, she had to deal with more urgent matters, mainly in rejecting Rogers's first plan. In the course of 1970, she was busy with the War of Attrition and the efforts to bring it to an end. The IDF Chief of Staff Chaim Bar-Lev made sure that she was informed of every operation across the Canal. As a rule, he sought her approval for every major operation, in addition to that of Defense Minister Dayan, his direct superior. Only from March 1971, she found more time to deal with less urgent matters and consider new ideas, mostly focusing on an interim agreement with Egypt that would open the Suez Canal. Here she was ready to make some concessions. From early 1971 until the outbreak of the Yom Kippur War in October 1973, the interim agreement was

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<sup>12</sup> Ben-Porat, *Conversations*, pp. 75–76.

<sup>13</sup> Yehuda Ben-Meir, *Decision-Making: Issues in National Security—an Israeli Perspective*, Tel Aviv, 1987. For criticism of the decision-making process of the Meir Government see Rabin, *Service Book*. See also, "Nasser and Sadat 1967–1973, From June to October", New Brunswick, 1977; Moshe Shemesh, "Egypt's Commitment to the Palestinian Cause", in *Jerusalem Quarterly* 34, winter 1985, pp. 16–31; Mahmoud Riad, *The Struggle for Peace in the Middle East*, London, 1981; Yigal Kipnis, 1973: *The Road to War*, Or Yehuda, 2012; Boaz Venetik and Zaki Shalom, *The Yom Kippur War, A War that could have been Averted*, Tel Aviv, 2012.

at the top of Israel's diplomatic agenda. At this time, the IDF also consolidated its security concept. That meant that from March 1969 until March 1971 she had little time or peace of mind to deal with new ideas in an orderly fashion. On the contrary, the experience of these two years taught her that Nasser could not be relied upon, after all he had ordered ground-to-air missiles moved to the edge of the Suez Canal in stark violation of the cease-fire; she was not sure if she could trust President Nixon because of delays in American arms shipments and the long time it took the United States to admit that there had been a violation of the cease-fire. She could not trust Sadat who succeeded Nasser in September 1970. She did make some efforts, but these were not accompanied by a deep conviction that they would lead to peace as she described it a number of times. Taking all this into account, this was the way that Israel undertook some diplomatic moves between the summer of 1970 and the spring of 1973, when she made the final meaningful diplomatic move prior to the outbreak of the war.

Reading carefully newly declassified Israeli and American documents, as well as Soviet and even Egyptian sources, it can be safely said that there was not much of a chance for a comprehensive Egyptian-Israeli arrangement, let alone full-fledged peace, unless it was accompanied by two key Arab demands—total Israeli withdrawal to the lines of June 5, 1967, and the resolution of the Palestinian problem in all its aspects based on many United Nations General Assembly resolutions starting in 1948. Egypt never suggested direct negotiations. Years later, Abba Eban described this in his colorful language as follows: whoever thought that peace could be borne without its parents meeting even once—was living under a delusion. Both Kissinger and Nixon understood that there was no hope at the time for a comprehensive agreement. Egypt had not yet recovered from its humiliating defeat in the Six Days War. Nasser's policy was that he would never negotiate with Israel from a position of military inferiority. The Egyptians led themselves to think that something had to happen before Israel would withdraw. Either the superpowers would do the job for the Arabs as they did in 1957 or Egypt must embark on war to restore its national honor. In those years, Egypt also had full commitment to the Palestinian people and Sadat strenuously objected to the ties that were being forged between Israel and Jordan. During the first eighteen months of Golda's premiership, Nasser was still president of Egypt. He had not changed since she left the Foreign Ministry in 1965 and remained Israel's major enemy. He had no intentions to enter into direct or indirect negotiations with Israel. All his senior aides later testified to this. To an Israeli message through Jarring in 1970 he responded that his standing in the Arab world did not allow him to deal with Israel. An additional Egyptian tactic was to embarrass Israel in as many ways as possible, among them the proposed visit of Dr. Nahum Goldmann to Cairo in the spring of 1970.

Golda's first trip to the United States as prime minister took place in September 1969, when she readily accepted an invitation extended by President Nixon that she come on a state visit. The trip was very carefully prepared. The timing, too, was quite obvious—a few weeks before the Knesset elections. Nixon signalled that he preferred Golda to lead the next government of Israel. Perhaps he already knew that she had decided to continue as head of the Government of National Unity. In any case, the trip was designed to bolster her standing in Israel, in the United States and in the international arena. He also wanted to soothe the leadership of American Jews, most of whom had not voted for him in 1968. He would invite them to the state dinner at the White House, he would not abandon Israel, and this would be a golden opportunity to heap praise on Golda and on Israel. The administration had not forgotten that a major figure, Governor Scranton, had already in early 1969 declared that the Nixon administration would pursue an even-handed policy in the Middle East, just as he was about to cross from Jordan to Israel on the Allenby Bridge. The term “even handed policy” reminded both American Jews and Israel of a similar Dulles' statement in May 1953 and they interpreted it to mean an anti-Israel policy. The new administration had to make up for this gaffe.

Even before Golda arrived in the United States, certain facts were created in Washington. The Middle East would remain the domain of the Department of State, Assistant Secretary of State William Rogers and his Under Secretary for Near Eastern Affairs Joseph Sisco. National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger, being a Jew, was told by Nixon that he would not deal directly with the Arab-Israel conflict but would focus on Vietnam, superpowers relations, China, Japan and Europe. Perhaps Nixon preferred that someone else who was not Jewish would handle the Middle East for the time. He may have realized that the chances for any progress in achieving a regional arrangement were close to zero and may have preferred that criticism that was bound to come would be levelled at the State Department and not the White House. The struggle for priority in formulating the United States foreign policy and who had the ears of the president began from day one. Kissinger, the Jewish immigrant from Germany and the patrician Rogers, found themselves in conflict on virtually every issue. The arbiter was President Nixon.<sup>14</sup>

Israel's ambassador in Washington in those days was the very popular Yitzhak Rabin. Since he was seen as the victorious chief of staff of the Israel Defense Forces in the Six Days War, many doors were opened to him and his advice on global military issues was very much sought after. Rabin personally hosted Richard Nixon during the latter's visit to Israel in July 1967, escorted him to

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<sup>14</sup> Henry Kissinger, *White House Years*, Boston, 1979; see also Bar-On, “Five Decades”.

the Golan Heights and spent much time with him. He predicted that Nixon would be the next president of the United States. Nixon held this in Rabin's favour. From early 1969, Rabin began to notice and to warn Jerusalem that a worrisome change could be detected in the American policy regarding the resolution of the Arab-Israel conflict. Under the impact of the War of Attrition, the Department of State was considering an American initiative aimed at appeasing the Arabs while at the same time limiting Soviet presence and influence in the Middle East. Above all, it sought to obtain from Israel what its intentions were. Rogers allowed the American Ambassador to the United Nations Charles Yost to embark on conversations with his Soviet, British and French counterparts in the United Nations that became known as the four powers talks. Rogers also held long conversations with the Soviet Ambassador to Washington Anatoly Dobrinin to discuss general guidelines for the resolution of the conflict. These were known as the two powers talks. Israel was alarmed, and rightly so, that these discussions would be interpreted by the Arabs to mean that there was no need for them to negotiate with Israel. Someone else would negotiate for them and obtain Israeli concessions as in 1957. Rogers assumed that the Soviets would obtain Nasser's agreement for the new ideas that were beginning to crystallize, while he would succeed in convincing the Israelis. Kissinger was far less enthusiastic about the State Department's ideas that focused mainly on almost total Israeli withdrawal in return for vague Arab promises to avoid attacking. In his memoirs, Kissinger wrote in much detail about the inter-departmental struggles that developed in the administration on the Middle East and his efforts to make sure that Rabin would be updated on their evolution. On the eve of Golda's departure for the United States, Rabin reported to her on the mood in the American capital. She realized that while there would be a great deal of ceremony, receptions and even some nostalgia, the discussions were bound to be difficult. On that trip, she also raised the possibility that Rabin would return home and serve in her next cabinet either as foreign minister or minister of education and culture.<sup>15</sup>

On September 24, 1969, her plane landed in Philadelphia. A crowd numbering more than 30,000 greeted her in Independence Square in that historic city where the United States had proclaimed its independence. The next day she flew in a presidential plane to Washington. The sun shone brightly when Golda and Nixon mounted the podium on the White House lawn for the state ceremony that included the playing of the national anthems, a 21-gun salute and review of the guard of honor. Golda wrote later that her eyes were full of tears.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Rabin, *Service Book*, p. 255.

<sup>16</sup> Meir, *My Life*, p. 283.

She remembered the soldiers along the Suez Canal. Perhaps she may have pondered about the long way the little Jewish girl from the Milwaukee ghetto traversed until she came to the White House as the prime minister of the sovereign State of Israel. The ceremony was broadcast live in Israel and caused much excitement. But there was little time for nostalgia. Once the ceremony was over, she and Nixon sat alone for almost two hours. During that time, all the other dignitaries, Rabin, Rogers, Kissinger and other senior officials, sat in a nearby room passing the time with small talk. There was no note taker. Two days later, Golda dictated her version of the conversation to Dinitz. The American documents do not contain any verbatim record of these talks. Apart from Israel's requests for additional planes that included 25 "Phantom" jets, 80 "Skyhawks" and other items such as an annual 200 million dollars loan for the next five years to pay for this hardware. Golda told the president that Israel could not withdraw unless there were written and binding peace agreements with the Arabs, she was opposed to the establishment of a third Palestinian state between Israel and Jordan and that third parties should not be involved in the negotiations. When she mentioned terror, she said plainly that Israel would respond to any attack.<sup>17</sup> Nixon defended the four and two powers talks although he seemed less enthusiastic about them to Golda. He made no commitment to issue a statement saying that the United States would support Israel's security, but he made it clear that if attacked by the Soviet Union, Israel could rely on American help. An important decision was reached regarding the channels of communications between the two heads of state. The White-House-Jerusalem channel would be maintained in the following manner: Nixon-Kissinger-Rabin-Dinitz-Golda. This would bypass the Foreign Ministry of Israel and the Department of State. In this manner, Golda did to Eban what Ben-Gurion did to her when she was foreign minister. This move badly hurt Eban's ability to function in this highly complex Israel-America relationship. This territory would now be exclusively in the hands of the prime minister.

She relied on Kissinger whom she came to like although she did not know him well. He admired her and in his memoirs he described her in the following words:

She was an original. Her childhood in the Russia of pogroms and her youth as a pioneer in the harshness of Palestine taught her that only the wary are given the opportunity to survive and those who fight succeed in that effort. Her craggy face bore witness to the destiny of a people that had come to know too well the potentiality of man's inhumanity. She had a penetrating mind, leavened by earthiness and a mischievous sense of humor. She was not taken in by elevated rhetoric, or particularly interested in the finer points of

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<sup>17</sup> Kissinger, *White House Years*, p. 366.

negotiating tactics. She cut to the heart of the matter. She answered pomposity with irony and dominated conversations by her personality and shrewd psychology. To me she acted as a benevolent aunt toward an especially favored nephew, so that even to admit the possibility of disagreement was a challenge to family hierarchy producing emotional outrage. It was usually calculated.<sup>18</sup>

Compared to Kissinger, Golda was far less impressed with Rogers. Kissinger noted that she treated Rogers as if the reports of his views could not be possibly true, and that she was certain that once he had a chance to explain himself the misunderstanding caused by the inevitably inadequacy of reporting telegrams would vanish. Then, added Kissinger, she promised forgiveness. She was more charitable in her own description of the secretary of state:

Personally, I always liked William Rogers. He is a very nice, very courageous and extremely patient man, and in the end it was he who proposed and brought about the cease-fire in August 1970. But (and I hope he will forgive me for writing this) I suspected that he never really understood the background to the Arab wars against Israel, or ever realized that the verbal reliability of the Arab leaders was not, in any way, similar to his own. I remember how enthusiastically he told me about his first visits to the Arab states and how immensely impressed he was by Feisal's 'thirst for peace.' As is true in many other gentlemen I have known, Rogers assumed—wrongly, unfortunately—that the whole world was made up of other gentlemen.<sup>19</sup>

No final statement was issued at the end of the talks. Nixon's spokesman said on behalf of the president that there were no new initiatives to announce. The state dinner at the White House was a special gesture to Golda and to American Jewish leaders. Leonard Bernstein and Isaac Stern, both old friends of Golda's, played, while governors, senators and Congressmen were moved by the warm embraces with which she was received. She herself told the president: "Thank you for allowing me to return home and tell my people that we have a friend, a great friend in the White House. That will help, it will help overcome the difficulties".<sup>20</sup>

Perhaps the most important achievement of her talks with the president was the understanding she reached with Nixon regarding Israel's nuclear activities. As foreign minister, when Israel had faced massive American pressures on this issue, she had already proposed full disclosure to the Americans on this sensitive issue and was accused by Shimon Peres and others for being naïve. Now, almost a

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 370.

<sup>19</sup> Meir, *My Life*, p. 278.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 285. Kissinger raised an eyebrow when he heard this. Nixon was not known for liking Jews. Kissinger assumed that Golda used these words to commit Nixon to them. Kissinger, *White House Years*, p. 370.

decade after much recrimination and acrimonious arguments, she made the right decision. The American documents deleted fifteen minutes of talk between Golda and Nixon. It can safely be assumed that she reached an agreement with the president of the United States that Israel would not test, nor deploy ground-to-air missiles at least until 1972 and would maintain secrecy, using the by then trite expression: “Israel would not be the first country to introduce nuclear weapons to the Middle East”. In return, Nixon agreed that the United States would not press Israel on this matter and the on-site visits by American inspectors agreed upon by Ben-Gurion in 1961 would end. The president did not even ask Israel to sign the Non Proliferation Treaty (NPT). This meant that Israel now enjoyed an American umbrella in this sphere and whenever any country raised the issue, America would not cooperate with that nation. The policy of opacity has served Israel well since 1969 and its validity to this very day became a central element in Israel’s deterrent power. The new policy released all Israeli prime ministers since 1969 of the need to deal with the issue with every new American president. Nixon understood that there was a need for a small country, surrounded by enemies to maintain a deterrent force, but that depended also on Israel’s leaders. As long as Israel would be led by responsible and cautious leaders, there would be no fear. He, like Kennedy and Johnson before him, may have understood that there would be trouble if America would constantly confront Israel on this issue that even Golda considered as a necessary evil.

At the conclusion of her talks in Washington, that also included discussions with Rogers, Secretary of Defense Laird, leaders of the House and Senate, as well as newspapers editors, she flew to Los Angeles for meetings mostly with the Jewish community on the West Coast. On the way back to New York she stopped off for several hours in Milwaukee where she had an emotional visit to Public School 4 that has been named after her in 1979. To Regina, she later reported that most of the children were black. From there she proceeded to New York. More receptions, meetings with the United Nations Secretary General, the mayor, the governor, a United Jewish Appeal dinner, a gala dinner tended in her honor by Israel Bonds, a press conference and meetings with the editorial board of the “New York Times”. Two days before flying back to Israel, she realized something was wrong. Moshe Bitan, the Head of the American Desk in the Israel Foreign Ministry told her that an American diplomat had told him that there were rumors in Washington about a deal concocted between her and Nixon whose main point was that Israel would give America “software” in the shape of a document in which Israel accepted American proposals regarding withdrawal and security arrangements but not for peace. All this would be in return for American “hardware”, meaning American weapons. She demanded that Rabin get Kissinger on the phone and insisted that the call would be on the record. She scolded Kissinger. “I heard so-and-so about

software and hardware. What is this? Was this expression ever used in my presence? What are you talking about? What paper would Israel give? Who told me that?”<sup>21</sup> Kissinger, somewhat embarrassed by this barrage, failed to understand the origin of this leak, but did not deny its existence. This incident overshadowed the end of her visit. She decided not to make an issue of this, among other reasons not to hurt the chances of the Israel Labor Party in the coming elections, less than a month away, and to crown her American trip as a major success.

Rabin continued to report about ongoing American-Soviet contacts that now focused on ideas concerning the future Egyptian-Israel borders. It looked as though the Americans and the Russians were close to an agreement both on borders and on procedure, namely indirect but proximity talks known as the Rhodes formula. However, Israel's leaders' minds were on the October 28 elections. The new Alignment, consisting of the Labor Party and Mapam, won 56 seats, an Arab list associated with Labor won 4 seats. Gachal—the Herut-Liberal Bloc—rose to 26, the National Religious Party won 12 seats, the Independent Liberals 4. Two other parties, the Greater Israel Movement and Young Israel consisting mostly of Sephardic Jews, failed to obtain the minimal votes required for Knesset membership. The lesson was clear. While the right-wing nationalist parties gained some strength, the Israeli voter still trusted the Labor Party and the prime minister. In the course of November and early December, Golda was busy putting together her next cabinet that was due to remain a National Unity cabinet. Pinchas Sapir went back to the Finance Ministry and Sherf, whose performance was seen less than stellar, took over commerce and industry. Allon remained deputy prime minister and took over the Ministry of Culture and Education. Dayan and Eban kept their posts in defense and foreign affairs. There were six ministers without portfolio (Begin, Dulcin, Barzilai, Shem-Tov and Galili). Dayan threatened to resign unless Peres was also included in the cabinet. With a heavy heart, Golda caved in and Peres became minister without portfolio responsible for development in the occupied territories and acting minister of immigrant absorption. Later he became minister of posts and changed the name of the office to Ministry of Communications. Even later he became minister of transport. As long as Golda was prime minister, he was not given a major department to run.

Golda was not overly excited about the continuation of the National Unity Government. She preferred a smaller, more manageable cabinet. But after her bitter experience of May 1967, when she vehemently opposed the creation of a National Unity Government, now she did not want to be accused of its dismantling and for the time being there was no valid reason to do so. On the contrary, on December 9,

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<sup>21</sup> Rabin, *Service Book*, p. 259.



1969, the Nixon administration supplied the reasons for its continuation. The United States government continued their efforts to reach an understanding with the Soviet Union on a formula whose main points would be an Israeli withdrawal to the 1967 lines with minor border rectifications in return for security guarantees by the Arabs. In October, various drafts were already exchanged between Washington and Moscow. Nasser, apprised of these developments, rejected their main points out of hand. But this did not deter Rogers from announcing his plan that won the title Rogers I. He did so in a speech in Washington, probably to indicate to the Arab world that the United States was finally initiating a plan. Israel's withdrawal would be almost total apart from minor changes necessary for mutual security. Sharm el-Sheikh would be returned to Egyptian control but Israel would have the right for free navigation through the Straits of Tiran and certain security arrangements in the Sinai. The future of the Gaza Strip would be negotiated later. The key principle was reassertion of Egyptian sovereignty while giving Israel some security.<sup>22</sup> A complementary plan was delivered on December 18, 1969, to the ambassadors of the powers to the United Nations by Charles Yost and dealt with Israel-Jordan relations. Rogers stated that Jerusalem should not be redivided but Jordan had to be given an equal standing with Israel on religious, economic and civil issues. As for the Palestinian refugees, he repeated in effect the 1961 Joseph Johnson Plan—the right of return to Israel or compensation. The plan was very close to the Arab views, and Israel obviously was bound to reject it as not even being worthy as a basis for discussion. Golda called the plan “a catastrophe for Israel”.<sup>23</sup> She ordered the mobilization of Israel's friends in America to launch a massive campaign of protest. She also recalled Rabin home for consultations. She was livid over the fact that the United States did not see fit to consult with Israel prior to announcing the plan and all this after the praises she had heaped on Nixon in Washington scant two months earlier.

She was not prepared to be treated in a disparaging manner by America and saw the Rogers Plan as a personal insult. On December 22, the Israel cabinet announced that it was rejecting the plan in its totality since it omitted any mention of possible negotiations by the parties to the conflict on the key issues of secure and recognized boundaries.<sup>24</sup> Israel viewed the American attempt to appease the Arabs at her expense with anger. A week earlier, on December 15, 1969, when she presented her cabinet to the Knesset (and won a majority of 90 for, 10 against and 4 abstentions), she rejected the plan out of hand and repeated Israel's objections.

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<sup>22</sup> Meron Medzini, ed., *Israel's Foreign Relations—Selected Documents*, Vol. II, Jerusalem, 1977, pp. 875–879.

<sup>23</sup> Rabin, *Service Book*, p. 263.

<sup>24</sup> Medzini, *Documents*, p. 880.

In another address to the Knesset on December 29, she also responded to the new ideas concerning Jerusalem, which she of course also rejected.<sup>25</sup> When Rabin returned to Washington, he brought a personal message to the president from Mrs. Meir in which she explained the reasons for Israel's rejection of the plan, the negative implications contained in the two documents, the imposed settlement idea and the prevention of direct negotiations. She also stressed Israel's fear that the plan would be seen as American support for the Arab-Soviet interpretation of Resolution 242—the very resolution that they said called on Israel to withdraw to the pre-Six Days War borders while not granting her real peace in return.<sup>26</sup>

Meanwhile, the pressure exerted by American Jews on the Nixon administration did not abate. Nixon and Kissinger were unwilling and not ready to give Rogers enough backing. The president decided to dispatch one of his closest associates, Leonard Garment, to Israel to deliver to Golda a personal top-secret message that in effect said that the White House and the president personally would not press for the implementation of the Rogers Plan.<sup>27</sup> Since the Soviets rejected the plan even before it was announced and the Egyptians did the same, and Israel was adamantly opposed, the administration decided to put the plan on hold, in effect to freeze it, and the American attempt to reach an Arab-Israel arrangement hit a snag. It left deep scars among all involved. Rogers was badly hurt by the personal attacks on him emanating from Israel and by American Jewish leaders. He also realized that he had lost any support from the White House and blamed Kissinger for the failure of the plan. Nixon regretted the entire episode. Kissinger claimed he had not even been personally involved in the abortive scheme. As for Golda, and this was one of the more negative outcomes of the plan—she now viewed with growing suspicion any American idea, especially if it bore the name William Rogers. She was not against peace. She was against an imposed settlement dictated by the two superpowers. Rogers found another way to express his anger and frustration. He was able to push a decision holding up the delivery of 24 “Phantom” fighter bombers to Israel and in late March 1970 made a public announcement to that effect. Since Israel was then in the midst of the War of Attrition that caused it growing losses in airplanes, it was very sensitive to any delay in resupplying. The situation became even more aggravated when it was evident that Soviet technicians were helping the Egyptians operate ground-to-air missiles near the Suez Canal.

The War of Attrition began in the fall of 1967, but the serious escalation started on September 8, 1968, when the Egyptians opened a massive artillery barrage

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<sup>25</sup> Statement in the Knesset, 29 December 1969; Medzini, Documents, pp. 883–891.

<sup>26</sup> Rabin, Service Book, p. 268.

<sup>27</sup> Spiegel, *The Other Arab-Israel Conflict*, p. 187.

along the entire Canal front, killing ten Israeli soldiers. A week later, Nasser declared that Egypt was now moving from a phase of active deterrence to the next phase designed to liberate Egyptian territories now occupied by Israel. Israel responded by bolstering the fortifications along the Canal and by launching raids deep into Egyptian territory across the Canal. On March 8, 1969, Egypt formally announced that it had launched a War of Attrition whose aim was to shell Israeli positions. In response, Israeli artillery shelled Egyptian cities along the Canal and caused huge damage and caused the flight of Egyptians from the Canal Zone. The IDF adopted a new strategy—it would not cross the Canal but entrench itself in a new line of defense called “The Bar-Lev Line”, named after the IDF chief of staff. This was the first time in its history that the IDF conducted a classical defensive war, fearing mostly Soviet military intervention. At the end of 1969, the cabinet authorized the IDF to start aerial bombardment of targets deep in Egypt. This policy was adopted partly due to Rabin’s recommendation to deter the Egyptians and prove to the Soviets that Israel was capable of defending itself and cause the Egyptians massive casualties. He thought that the Soviets would then recommend to the Egyptians to enter into negotiations with Israel.<sup>28</sup> But the Israeli decision-making process was faulty. A historian who looked closely at the decision-making process wrote that “the truth is that the cabinet never held a fundamental discussion on the basis of a clear-cut expose of all the facts and implications...the Chief of Staff presented members of the Ministerial Committee for Defense a proposal for bombing certain well-defined strategic targets in Egypt. Following a number of hours of discussion, the Committee approved his proposal—in the absence of any other intelligence apart from that presented by the army”. It became known that the commander of the Israel Air Force was opposed and Defense Minister Dayan accepted his objections and postponed the bombing. The other ministers had very little clue as to the full implications of their decision. It was not known at the time that there was never an explicit decision taken either by the entire cabinet or at least the Ministerial Committee for Defense that “a physical presence along the Canal was a national interest or an Israeli national goal.” The moment the IDF arrived on the waterline (in defiance of specific orders of the defense minister to stay away from the Canal), inertia won and no one was prepared to make proposals whose meaning was withdrawal from the water line.<sup>29</sup> Golda approved the escalation. This decision was inevitable. Israel could not allow itself what

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<sup>28</sup> On the War of Attrition see Yaacov Bar-Siman-Tov, *The Israeli-Egyptian War of Attrition, 1969–1970: A Case-study of Limited Local War*, New York, 1980; Lawrence Whetten, *The Canal War—Four Power Conflict in the Middle East*, Cambridge, MA 1974; Dan Schueftan, *Attrition—Egypt’s Post War Political Strategy 1967–1970*, Tel Aviv, 1989.

<sup>29</sup> Ben-Meir, *Decision-Making*, pp. 94–95.

could be seen as a military setback. She also feared that the absence of response would be seen as a sign of weakness by the Israeli public. The initial public reaction was positive and the majority of Israelis supported their government in this policy. The Israelis were still used to viewing military force as the only way to deal with a defense issue and assumed that their leadership knew what it was doing. Golda may have believed that the bombing deep inside Egypt would lead Nasser to end the War of Attrition. She never intended to destroy Egypt. It was a sort of a war conducted by remote control with a small number of casualties. But the Israeli attacks did not break the spirit of the Egyptian people and only led to its growing reliance on the Soviet Union. In January 1970, Nasser rushed to Moscow and the Soviets began, in March 1970, to airlift ground-to-air SAM missiles accompanied by technicians and later by fighter pilots. In effect, from April 1970 the Soviet Union took upon itself the responsibility for Egypt's air defense. In April 1970, Israel ended the bombing of targets deep inside Egypt, but the war along the Canal continued unabatedly.

The Israeli public began to sense that something was wrong. The strategy did not yield the anticipated results. Egypt did not collapse. On the contrary, in the summer of 1970, there were over 15,000 Soviet technicians in its territory. Golda found herself in a bind. Some ministers suggested a unilateral cease-fire. This was supported by Eban and won the approval of the United States in March 1970.<sup>30</sup> Other ministers demanded a further escalation to reach a decisive point. But as the number of casualties grew—Israel lost 367 soldiers and civilians along the Canal front in the War of Attrition, sharp questions arose: what was the purpose of this war? Among Israeli youths a sense of unease began to prevail due to the growing number of casualties, their peers. A satirical review called “Queen of the Bathtub” lampooning the prime minister drew full houses. Few knew how to end this war in a respectable manner. Unilateral cease-fire could be interpreted as a sign of weakness leading the United States and the Soviet Union to demand more concessions. But the continuation of the war or its escalation could bring about a more extensive Soviet military intervention. No one recommended crossing the Canal. The UN mediator Gunnar Jarring was absent from the region during that time. The United States did not express any objection to Israeli bombing deep inside Egypt as it was busy with other matters—the escalation of the war in Vietnam, the invasion of Cambodia and the growing anti-Vietnam War sentiments in America. Nixon may have seen the War of Attrition as an Egyptian-Soviet collusion and did not want the impression created that the mighty United States was allowing the Russians to dictate its moves in the Middle East.

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30 Margalit, Message from the White House, pp. 61–64.

In March 1970, the Soviet leaders demanded that Nixon impose a cease-fire on Israel, but he refused.

In the midst of this cauldron, a new affair exploded, that of the invitation of Nahum Goldmann to visit Egypt for talks with her leaders. The relations between Golda and Goldmann were never warm or close. In 1946, she had already said: “I do not like a man whose tongue is slick with no stuttering”.<sup>31</sup> Goldmann was highly critical of the policy of the government of Israel in general and that of the prime minister in particular. He supported an arrangement with the Palestinians, a Middle East regional disarmament of all types of weapons, a neutral Israel living in peace with all its neighbors and above all an end to the occupation by a unilateral Israeli withdrawal for the sake of promoting peace. His articles appeared in highly respected and influential publications and since he was the founder and long-time president of the World Jewish Congress, he had an international standing. Golda had made sure that he would not be re-elected Chairman of the Jewish Agency Executive in 1968. He was a wealthy man, held seven passports (including an Israeli diplomatic passport) and owned apartments in various capitals. Goldmann was haughty and systematically angered Golda (as he had Ben-Gurion before her). The details of this affair are murky.<sup>32</sup> In March 1970, Goldmann informed Golda that he had received an invitation to visit Cairo under certain conditions and that this invitation was extended through friends close to President Tito of Yugoslavia—one of them was Eric Rouleau, the Middle East affairs correspondent of the French daily “Le Monde” and the other was Ahmed Hamrush, the editor of the Egyptian weekly “Roz el Yussef”, close to Nasser. Goldmann claimed that Egypt conditioned this visit upon an Israel government approval. He later claimed that he had not sought prior government approval but that it would simply note that he was going to Egypt with its knowledge. Golda was under the impression that he sought prior approval and rightly refused. She brought the matter to the Ministerial Defense Committee from where it was leaked to the Jerusalem correspondent of “Le Monde”. Goldmann later claimed there was no need to raise the proposed trip before the Ministerial Committee, and in so doing Golda torpedoed the entire venture. A year later, he claimed that he was able to arrange for Moshe Dayan to visit Cairo. At the time, Golda did not ask

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<sup>31</sup> Yitzhak Rafael, *I Did Not Win the Light*, p. 33.

<sup>32</sup> On the Goldmann Affair see Gazit, *Peace Process*, pp. 42–52; Ben-Porat, *Conversations*, pp. 35–37 and 77–79; Raphael Patai, *Nahum Goldmann: His Mission to the Gentiles*, Univ. of Alabama, 1987, pp. 212–268; see also Meir Hazan, “The Nahum Goldmann Affair to Meet with Nasser in 1970”, *The Golda Meir Association*; see also the chapter “The Goldmann Affair, an Invitation to Cairo that Never Was”, in Mordechai Gazit, *Israel Diplomacy and the Quest for Peace*, London, 2002, pp. 79–89.

anyone and approved the trip that never materialized because it never existed. But this time, how could she approve of a trip of a man whose views she opposed? She could never know what he would be telling the Egyptians, what ammunition he would be supplying to their propaganda machine and what impression would be created in Israel. She realized that Nasser laid a trap to Israel. He understood that America was losing the war in Vietnam not on the battlefield in that Asian country but because of America's public opinion. He may have wanted to split the Israelis by floating a wedge between young Israelis and their leaders.

When the matter leaked, the government of Israel was forced to issue a public statement saying that it would “respond to any expression of willingness on the part of the Egyptian president for a meeting to discuss vital issues to Egypt and Israel in which each party is free to determine its representatives. Therefore, in response to Dr. Goldmann's request that the government approve his meeting with the president of Egypt, the government decided to give a negative response.”<sup>33</sup>

The statement was received by many Israelis with misgivings. There was fear that the government was torpedoing a peace mission without relating to the issue whether Goldmann was really invited to Egypt and under what conditions. The desire for peace or at least cease-fire was so great that writers of editorials in the Israeli daily newspapers did not even bother to seek the true details relating to this invitation that were not well known or at least highly controversial. Golda had to defend her position, which she did in the Knesset on April 7, 1970, without much success. She and Goldmann accused each other of not telling the truth. Goldmann claimed that Eban and Dayan supported his trip, a fact that both denied. The Israeli public continued to deal with the matter for weeks when it became clear that the entire trip was questionable. There was no certainty that he had indeed been invited by Nasser. An Egyptian government spokesman denied the existence of an invitation.<sup>34</sup> By then it was immaterial. A day after Golda's Knesset statement, a letter was published written by 56 high school students in Jerusalem who were about to join the IDF. They protested the government policy on the Goldmann trip: “So far we believed that we are going to fight and serve for three years because there is no other choice. After this affair, when it became evident that there is an alternative, and even the smallest, it is being ignored. In view of this we and many others doubt how we can fight in an eternal hopeless war while our government directs its policy towards missing hopes for peace.” True, the office of the prime minister was swamped by thousands of letters in support of the government policy, but Golda was upset and asked the education

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<sup>33</sup> Cabinet Statement, 5 April 1970.

<sup>34</sup> *Gazit*, Peace Process, p. 46.

minister Yigal Allon to meet with the high school students. Golda Meir's greatest failure in this matter was in the area of public relations. Her initial agreement to allow Goldmann to dictate the clandestine way in which the government dealt with the trip was the root of the problem. There was no doubt that the government was within its rightful jurisdiction as to who would represent it in talks with Egypt. But the explanations supplied by Golda and other spokespersons were not convincing and part of the public refused to accept them. A gap between Golda and the Israeli academic community had already developed and was growing. She saw in them a negative choir of do-gooders who could only bolster the enemy. Was this what they teach their students, she wondered, those very students who have to do reserve duty at the Suez Canal?

At that very time, Richard Nixon faced a growing public opposition to the war in Vietnam and the imbroglio in Cambodia. His arguments in favor of continuing the war were similar to those used by Golda, which was not highly complimentary to her. The damage accrued to her image was serious. She began to appear as rigid, sealed to new ideas and fanatic when it came to her policies. True, from the standpoint of good order and proper procedure she was right. But since those in her bureau were less interested or aware of the communications part of this affair, there was also a public relations setback abroad. In this arena, Egypt won some points without really ever intending to invite Goldmann. Egypt had a better understanding now about Israel's sensitivity towards any Egyptian move that could be interpreted as more flexible without really meaning it. On the contrary, Egypt was now more demanding of Israel to agree to her terms for a cease-fire that more and more Israelis craved.

However, this did not yet influence the evolution of the War of Attrition that was raging along the Canal. It had been noted that already in February, Abba Eban had proposed that Israel offer a unilateral cease-fire. But some ministers feared that Egypt would offer mutual and binding commitments to end this war and demand that Israel return to the June 1967 lines as determined by the Security Council. Golda was angry with Eban for not consulting her prior to raising the idea with the Americans. From Washington, Rabin cabled that Israel must not show any signs of weakness at this time, when it enjoyed the support of the United States on the matter of the growing Soviet involvement in Egypt. Between March and June 1970, the United States did little to pursue the idea of a cease-fire. Washington did announce that it was giving Israel's requests for arms a positive consideration but was in no hurry to resupply Israel with planes. The hint was clear—weapons in return for Israeli concessions. However, the situation changed dramatically when Israel announced on April 29, 1970, that Soviet pilots were now engaged in operational flights over Egypt in Egyptian airforce planes. The Israel government also confirmed that the Soviets were busy moving SAM 1

ground-to-air missiles closer to the water edge.<sup>35</sup> Perhaps because of this drastic change in the situation, the Nixon administration finally decided to let Israel have the planes on condition that there would be no public announcement. The Israeli response came in the form of a Knesset address on May 29, in which Golda repeated Israel's readiness to enter into negotiations with no prior conditions.<sup>36</sup>

From various sources, Israel learned that a new American initiative designed to achieve a cease-fire was in the making. In the Canal Zone itself, the war intensified. In May 1970 alone, 18 Israeli soldiers were killed and two "Phantom" jets downed. The Soviet ground-to-air missiles turned out to be highly effective whereas something in the Israeli planes armaments was lacking. As expected, on June 19 Rogers's new plan, named Rogers II, was presented to the governments of Israel, Egypt and Jordan. The public part of the initiative stated that the three parties should accept Resolution 242 in all its parts and be prepared to implement it. They would dispatch representatives to talks to be held under the auspices of Ambassador Jarring whose aim was the reach an agreement on establishing peace based on mutual recognition of the sovereignty, territorial integrity and independence of all nations and Israeli withdrawal from territories occupied as a result of the hostilities of 1967. The parties would observe a three-months cease-fire to help Jarring carry out his mission.<sup>37</sup> The secret part of the plan aimed only at Israel and conditioned the supply of weapons on a positive Israeli response to Rogers II.<sup>38</sup> The plan obviously raised highly sensitive issues in Israel. Resolution 242 in all its parts was interpreted also to mean Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank, the Golan Heights and the Gaza Strip as well as East Jerusalem. This would inevitably dissolve the Government of National Unity. Israel was not too enthusiastic over the limited cease-fire that would enable the Egyptians to improve their military situation. Golda reviewed the plan with her close associates and decided to reject it without presenting it to her cabinet. On June 21, she told the American Ambassador that she would not recommend the acceptance of the plan by the cabinet. The matter was discussed in the cabinet on that day and as expected was rejected by the Israeli ministers. On June 29, addressing the Knesset, Golda hinted at Israel's negative approach to the plan.<sup>39</sup> The American reaction came in a personal note from President Nixon to the prime minister. He wrote that there would be no repercussions for Israel concerning the supply of weapons. In an interview in early July, Nixon said that Israel had the right to defensible borders, meaning

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<sup>35</sup> Israel Government Statement, Medzini, Documents, pp. 896–913.

<sup>36</sup> Statement in the Knesset, 29 May 1970; Medzini, Documents, pp. 896–913.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 913.

<sup>38</sup> Rabin, *Service Book*, p. 295; Kissinger, *White House Years*, pp. 578–597.

<sup>39</sup> Statement in the Knesset, 29 June 1970; Medzini, Documents, pp. 941–951.



she would not have to make a commitment to withdraw to the 1967 borders.<sup>40</sup> In July, the Americans sent some electronic equipment to Israel and released several more planes from the 1968 deal. All this was aimed at softening the attitude of the prime minister. The IDF high command felt that acceptance of the plan would be seen as an admission of weakness and failure in the War of Attrition. All waited to see what the Egyptian response would be. At the end of July, Nasser responded positively to the plan and Israel had to reconsider its position, mainly because of another presidential letter to Golda which arrived on July 23. In that letter, Nixon made a commitment not to pressure Israel on the issue of the Palestinian refugees and stated that final borders had to be determined by full agreement between the parties after negotiations; until such time, there would be no Israeli withdrawal from the existing cease-fire lines.<sup>41</sup>

In a meeting at Golda's kitchen, Eban and Allon supported acceptance of the new American initiative based on the clarifications made by the president. Golda was not yet certain how to react. She knew that acceptance of the plan would mean the end of the Government of National Unity as Gachal would secede. Not that she was too upset over this possibility, but she was afraid that Israel would be served additional unpleasant surprises, but she could not know their contents and from which direction they would arise.<sup>42</sup> On July 29, a new development forced new thinking. Israeli Air Force planes shot down four Egyptian MIGs flown by Russian pilots. Although the news was secret, it leaked and created a great deal of concern in both Jerusalem and Washington. This escalation only served to propel Israel to give Rogers II a positive response, which it did. As expected, Gachal announced its withdrawal from the cabinet. In the last meeting with its ministers, Begin gallantly kissed Golda's hand and called her a "Proud Jewess". He and his colleagues seceded because they thought the government's acceptance of Rogers II was linked to a withdrawal from Judea and Samaria (the West Bank). Not all Gachal ministers were happy with Begin's decision to secede. They were led by transport minister Ezer Weizman who preferred to remain to ensure that there would be no withdrawals in other sectors. But Begin imposed his will on them. It can be safely assumed that Golda heaved a sigh of relief. Now she would run Israel's foreign and defense policies without this partner, courteous and polite as he was.

The Israeli reply to the United States government was delivered in two stages. The first on July 31 was an agreement to observe a cease-fire and the

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<sup>40</sup> Gazit, *Peace Process*, p. 62.

<sup>41</sup> Rabin, *Service Book*, p. 296; Kissinger, *White House Years*, p. 584; Margalit, *Message from the White House*, pp. 158–159.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 161.

appointment of a representative to the Jarring talks. The second consisted of an Israel government statement issued on August 4 in which Israel said it would attend the talks in accordance with her own interpretation of Resolution 242.<sup>43</sup> However, the United States did not even wait for the Israeli second reply and informed Ambassador Jarring who was in New York at the time of Israel's positive response. Golda was angry and in a tense phone call to Sisco, with Rabin listening in, she accused the United States of forging Israel's signature on the letter of agreement, since at that time Israel had not yet delivered its final acceptance. The United States was simply one move ahead of Israel. Sisco claimed that Israel had already accepted the American version, but Golda said this was not so and that Israel had not yet completed its own formulation. Great tension ensued and this could be felt in this harsh conversation. Golda's main fear was that the Americans had given Jarring a different formula than the one agreed upon by the Israeli cabinet. Rabin was ordered by Golda to meet Kissinger. The latter accused Israel of delaying its reply to the plan that it had received on June 19. Rabin, according to his own testimony, asked Golda to dictate to him verbatim what he was supposed to tell Kissinger, but she obviously declined. Instead Allon and Eban and others got on the line and finally resolved the tangle, not before much unnecessary anger, recriminations and misunderstandings were evident. Kissinger had some mean cracks on the work habits of the Israel cabinet.<sup>44</sup> The mess became evident two days later. On August 4, Golda explained to the Knesset the reasons that had led her to accept the initiative, among them Egypt's acceptance, the American president's promises concerning arms, Israel's desire for peace, and her wish to stop the bloodshed, and expressed the hope that there would be no change in the military status quo, that the Egyptians would not bring forward their missiles to the water edge, and that the cease-fire would be mutually binding and include also paramilitary elements such as Palestinian terrorists emanating from Jordan.<sup>45</sup>

The next day, August 5, preparations were made for the cease-fire due to start on midnight August 7–8. Now there remained the need to formulate a document with the Americans that would define the cease-fire principles, its details and above all a map that would detail the meaning and depth of the "standstill zone", meaning the key issue of troop and equipment movement. But it turned out that not only were no position papers prepared, on August 6, the day before the entry into effect of the cease-fire, Defense Minister Dayan approved an American document that detailed the principles of the cease-fire, but no map was attached and the United States gave Israel no assurances in case of violations. Dayan approved

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<sup>43</sup> Medzini, Documents, pp. 915–917.

<sup>44</sup> Rabin, Service Book, pp. 297–289.

<sup>45</sup> Statement in the Knesset, 4 August 1970; Medzini, Documents, pp. 917–919.

the document after a cursory reading. Two other Israelis present, Generals Aharon Yariv and Shlomo Gazit, expressed amazement at the speed with which Dayan accepted the document. Later Dayan claimed that in any case the Egyptians were going to violate the cease-fire agreement, so why complicate matters. He may have feared that the United States would accuse Israel of piling last-moment difficulties that could derail the entire move. Gazit reported to the prime minister and she ordered Rabin to obtain a letter of assurances from the Americans, saying that Israel would be compensated if the agreement was violated. But no specific procedure was determined in case of violation.<sup>46</sup> Rabin was angry at the most unprofessional handling of the document but eventually managed to obtain the letter. As usual, there was no orderly staff work and while the prime minister made the right decision to accept the American initiative at the end of July after turning it down on June 21, the translation of the decision into reality on the ground was of a very low caliber.

At 8 pm, the prime minister went on radio and television and announced to Israel that the cease-fire was about to commence, expressing the hope that a new and better chapter would begin in Israel-Egypt relations. That night the fire died slowly. The last shells were fired close to midnight. At midnight, Israeli soldiers went up to the rooftops of their positions along the Canal and in the silence that finally prevailed some could hear truck engines making strange noise. The next morning it was obvious that on that very night the Egyptians had violated the cease fire and moved missiles close to the water edge. The price that Israel would pay as a result of this move was felt in the first few hours of the Yom Kippur War. Once it realized that a violation had occurred, Israel turned to the United States and asked Washington to confirm this and state what could be done about this. The possibilities were not many. One was an Israeli attack on the missile sites in the Canal Zone. The idea was rejected out of hand for fear of Soviet intervention but also of trouble with America. Another idea was to demand that Egypt restore the status quo and remove the missiles to where they had come from. To achieve that, there was need for Soviet intervention which was not forthcoming. The third option was to suspend Israel's participation in the Jarring talks, and this Israel did on September 6. A fourth idea was to demand American restoration of the balance of power by supplying Israel with anti-missile missiles and other types of defensive weapons. Meanwhile, the telephone lines between Washington and Jerusalem became overheated. The United States initially refused to confirm

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<sup>46</sup> Ben-Meir, *Decision-Making*, pp. 102–103; see also Uri Bar-Yossef, *The Watchman Fell Asleep—the Yom Kippur Surprise and its Origins*, Tel Aviv, 2001; Shimon Golan, *Decision-Making of the Israeli High Command during the Yom Kippur War*, Ben Shemen, 2013; Carmit Gai, *Bar-Lev—A Biography*, Tel Aviv, 1998.

that a violation had taken place. Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird said that the main thing was “to move towards negotiations and not argue over what had taken place 12 hours before or after”.<sup>47</sup> The violations continued and so did the American silence. Rabin met with administration officials. Dinitz was dispatched to Washington and Golda insisted that she fly at once to Washington for talks with the president. Only ten days later, on August 19, the United States finally confirmed that there indeed had been a violation. By then it had become a new reality and not much could be done to correct it. Israel felt cheated. The March 1957 syndrome was replayed. An Israeli complaint was seen as refusal on its part to enter into negotiations on withdrawal. To add insult to injury, the leaders of the opposition parties mocked the government. On September 1, Nixon authorized the despatch of 18 “Phantom” jets to provide Israel with an added sense of security and calm Golda on the eve of her visit to Washington. Meanwhile, more eyes were directed eastward, to Jordan, where a great drama was about to unfold.

The cease-fire along the Suez Canal was barely a month old when Israel was forced to turn its attention to another arena, this time on its eastern border. Since 1967, the size of the Palestine Liberation Organization units in Jordan had grown considerably and they began to harrass Israeli settlements in the Jordan Valley by shooting, by committing acts of sabotage and on occasion accompanied by artillery fire courtesy of the Jordanian army. The IDF sought to remove the terrorists from their strongholds on the Jordanian side of the cease-fire line in the Valley. In March 1968, the IDF carried out a major retaliatory operation in the Jordanian town of Karame. It failed and the IDF suffered considerable losses. One tank was captured by the Palestinians who displayed it in Amman to cheering crowds. The king feared that the IDF was about to advance towards his capital in spite of messages designed to allay his fears. The Karame raid was seen by the PLO as a major victory and strengthened its feeling that Jordan could continue to serve as a convenient base of operations against Israel in the West Bank and even within the Green Line. Soon its leader Yasser Arafat and George Habash, head of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, embarked on a new policy. They proclaimed that before the PLO entered into the decisive battle against Israel, it must first assure its base of operations in Jordan. This meant the creation of semi-autonomous areas in the kingdom under their exclusive control. They successfully managed to establish a number of liberated “Soviet” areas on Jordanian territory and the king began to gradually lose control over large tracts of land. On September 8, members of the PFLP carried out a daring operation when they hijacked three passenger planes belonging to TWA, Swissair and Pan American,

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47 Spiegel, *The Other Arab-Israel Conflict*, p. 195.

who were on their way to New York. Two had departed from Israel and one from London. An attempt to hijack an El Al flight flying to New York from Amsterdam on that very same day failed, but at the cost of the life of the copilot. However, the Israeli security personnel managed to capture one of the hijackers, Leila Haled, and handed her over to British authorities. A British Airways plane was also hijacked and flown with the others to a deserted air strip near the Jordanian city of Zarka.

The planes sat on the ground in the stifling heat and were finally blown up on September 12 in full view of scores of television cameras from many countries. The passengers remained in detention. It became obvious that the Jordanian monarchy was in the midst of a struggle to retain its territorial integrity and survival. The Jordanian government met for long hours. Some ministers argued that all must be done, even at the cost of a civil war, to expel the terrorists from Jordan. Others felt that a civil war would spell the end of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan and preferred to negotiate with Arafat. Similar arguments also prevailed in the Jordanian high command among officers who supported the PLO and those who wanted their expulsion. The king became in fact a prisoner in his own palace, protected by loyal Bedouin forces. The Arab states watched these developments with growing fear and so did Israel. At this stage, the Israeli government felt, like Moshe Dayan, that everything must be done to preserve the neighboring monarchy. The alternative could be far worse: if Jordan collapsed, there would be a huge void created into which Iraqi and Syrian forces would enter the kingdom and establish themselves along the Jordan River, thus creating a major threat to Israel. Dayan had hoped that the king would be able to deal with the threat with his own means, but began to consider limited Israeli military aid if so requested. But he insisted that any such move must be done in coordination with America.

In September 18, Golda paid her second visit to the United States. Unlike the previous one, this visit was billed as a working trip that did not require special ceremonies. The protocol of her conversation with Nixon on September 18 reveals that she complained about the very slow American response to the Egyptian violations of the cease-fire that had invited additional violations. Rabin mentioned the fact that America's promise to provide Israel with 100 "Shrike" anti missile missiles was reduced to 40, a fact confirmed by Nixon's Chief of Staff General Alexander Haig. Rabin showed the president maps that detailed the scale of the Egyptian violations, the number of missiles moved forward and their exact location and what could be their impact. Golda then explained in detail what had preceded the decision of the government of Israel to accept the cease-fire, above all the fear that the proposal included the implementation of Rogers I plan. Nixon's soothing letter made the government accept the Rogers II plan. She said

that while the Gachal secession from the National Unity Government was not critical, it showed how serious some of her domestic problems were. The president responded that Rogers I, as such, no longer existed and explained the principles that guided America's policy in the Middle East. America had no illusions about the negative Soviet role and recognized the need to correct the situation created as a result of the Egyptian violations. The president promised that the balance of power would not tilt against Israel. The corrections would be made in the shape of weapons, mostly planes that would arrive in the course of 1971. He realized the huge economic problems facing Israel and its need for additional credits, but he added, "do not think that you will get everything you ask. Together we shall prepare plans to provide you with your vital needs. If the fire was resumed, and the Egyptian missiles were activated and you need more planes, we shall consider this favorably and help you in the economic sphere as well." He stressed that he knew the Soviets no less than the Israelis and in order to illustrate America's deterrent power he was planning to visit units of the American Sixth Fleet in the Mediterranean to show that America took this seriously. The discussion then focused on events in Jordan. Both Nixon and Golda assumed that the king was still in control of the situation and the president expressed the hope that Israel would not act rashly. The prime minister promised him that Israel would never take any military initiative without informing the United States, something she did not consider necessary at this time.<sup>48</sup> She preferred to see Hussein solve his own problems by his own means. It seemed to Golda that some of the differences between Israel and America were for the time being amicably resolved.

On September 16, King Hussein launched an offensive against the Palestinians and it appeared for the time being that his efforts to exert his authority at least in Amman would be successful. Israel and the United States were carefully following any signs of Syrian and Iraqi intervention. On September 18, Israeli and American intelligence experts assessed that there would be no outside intervention. But they were wrong. Prior to flying back to Israel, Golda spent the weekend in New York for meetings with Jewish leaders and to address major donors in a gala event held at the New York "Hilton" hotel. At its conclusion, she was due to travel to the airport and fly to Tel Aviv. That evening, news arrived that Syrian tanks had crossed the Jordanian border and were moving south towards Irbid. Hussein confirmed this invasion. In a frantic phone call to the American ambassador in Amman, he requested American help in the shape of reconnaissance flights to determine the extent and dimension of the Syrian invasion and their present position.

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<sup>48</sup> Rabin, *Service Book*, p. 310 and pp. 311–319; Kissinger, *White House Years*, pp. 230–235.

The United States placed its forces in Germany on alert, warned the Syrians and the Russians and as was the normal procedure activated a Washington Special Actions Group to monitor events and recommend action. That evening, King Hussein asked for American air support to bomb the Syrians. The United States and Britain thought Israel should do this and Israel must be given assurances in case of Soviet intervention. Kissinger phoned Rabin and found him with Golda at the "Hilton" in the midst of a cocktail party that preceded the gala dinner. Rabin told Kissinger the latest Israeli intelligence and Kissinger told him of Hussein's request. The United States asked whether the Israel Air Force was capable of flying reconnaissance operations within the coming three hours. Rabin wanted to insure that the United States would not object if Israel bombed the Syrians by air if it appeared that they were moving south rapidly. Kissinger preferred to wait until things became clearer. As they were speaking, an urgent message arrived from Hussein through the American ambassador in Amman in which he said that the situation was so grave that it required aerial action. Nixon approved Israeli reconnaissance flights and if necessary aerial bombardment of the Syrians. Rabin was told of this permission and pulled Golda out of the hall to a side room to discuss with her the American request. This was not a normal situation. The king of Jordan was seeking Israeli military assistance to preserve his monarchy. Golda decided to call Yigal Allon, who was acting prime minister in her absence, and Defense Minister Dayan. Allon agreed to comply with the American request. Dayan was a bit more careful and asked how America would respond if the Soviets provided military aid to Syria. Golda made the decision and told Rabin to inform Kissinger that the Israel Air Force would fly a reconnaissance mission in the early daylight. The pilots would report their findings and Israel would do nothing more without consulting Washington. This was done to assure that in case of Soviet intervention the United States would come to Israel's aid. Rabin called his former colleagues at the IDF General Headquarters and suggested they establish direct communications with the Jordanian army in case there was need for massive Israeli intervention.

At midnight, Golda flew home to Israel. Rabin was flown to Washington on board a presidential plane. At 0551 the next morning he informed Kissinger that Israel felt that reconnaissance flights were not enough and asked what would be the American reaction if Israel activated ground forces. Until then, a number of IDF units were called up and assembled openly in a national park called the Park of the Three. Foreign correspondents in Israel were invited to watch this troop concentration, 20 kilometers from the Jordanian borders. Meanwhile the president authorized the use of Israeli forces according to need. Kissinger assumed that Israel would require 48 hours to mobilize its reserve forces and this would provide the king with the opportunity to expel the Syrians with his own forces,

and it would also give the United States some time in which to call the Russians and ask them to tell the Syrians to remove their tanks from Jordan.

The moment she landed in Israel, Golda met with Dayan and Bar-Lev. They thought there was need for clear-cut American commitments in writing as well as additional equipment in case the IDF suffered casualties in Jordan. They also thought that the United States must provide Israel with a political umbrella against Russia, Syria, Iraq and Egypt in case Nasser decided to resume the war in the Suez Canal. All this was not necessary. On September 20 and 21, the wheel turned around. Jordanian forces were able to repel the Syrian tanks north towards their border. The Soviet Union announced that they were restraining the Syrians and asked that the United States would restrain the Israelis. The king advised that his situation had improved considerably and there was no longer need for Israeli military intervention. On September 24, the Syrians crossed back to their country and the crisis seemed over. Hussein was also able to crush the Palestinian uprising in Amman. A day later, Kissinger called Rabin and asked him to convey a message from Nixon to Golda: “The President will never forget the role Israel played in preventing the deterioration in Jordan and halting the attempt to uproot the regime. The president also said that the United States was lucky that it had Israel as an ally in the Middle East. What happened would be taken into consideration in all future developments”.<sup>49</sup>

The crisis served to strengthen the understandings between the leaders of Israel and the United States. The latter were impressed with the manner in which the prime minister made decisions that could have involved Israel with the Soviets, of the speed of the Israeli call-up and the speed in which the Israel Air Force went into action. The Nixon administration was not surprised by Israel’s request for American military and political assurances and guarantees. The military cooperation between Israel and the United States did not go unnoticed in Moscow and in various Arab capitals. Their leaders also were impressed with Golda’s decisiveness, a trait that Nixon admired, and they all realized that the IDF, armed with the latest American weapons, could serve as an American arm in case of regional conflicts without the need to use American troops. This fit very nicely with the Nixon Doctrine: the reduction of American forces in sensitive areas overseas and growing reliance on stable local forces. Israel was the only such force in the Middle East.

In the fall of 1970, Israel entered into a period of relative tranquility that lasted until the Yom Kippur War. Its military operations focused mainly on preventing incursions and terrorist acts from Lebanon. The cease-fire lines with Jordan and

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49 Rabin, *Service Book*, p. 314.



Egypt were holding. Golda now had greater peace of mind and could start thinking of handling other issues, although defense and foreign policy remained at the top of her very crowded agenda. In those days her work habits as prime minister were crystallized, similar to those methods she used in the past.

In domestic politics, she became a sort of a moderator, arbiter and compromiser in the existing institutional framework, among individuals, personalities, groups and organizations, mostly in her party and government. Being pragmatic and realistic, she preferred to discuss certain issues in small and closed gatherings instead of large bodies. As was her wont, she kept many things secret and abhorred leaks to the media, although occasionally she did order her aides to use the leak weapon if necessary. The need for secrecy and the “need to know” that was limited to a small number of people was her way of fighting leaks, most of them emanating from ministers and senior officials. However, the results were highly negative. Secrecy limited and at times prevented open discussion. The absence of freewheeling discussion, mostly on foreign affairs and defense, meant that key issues and on occasion secret contacts were not discussed in an orderly manner. Alternative ideas were not raised and if mistakes were made, the necessary lessons were not always learned. She was always insistent that when it came to security and foreign affairs, and that was a vast area, maximum secrecy had to be maintained and sharing information had to be carefully weighed. The Israeli “talkfest” made contacts with friends and foes alike very difficult, she often claimed, no one would be willing to talk to them unless they were assured of total secrecy. Often, senior ministers like Eban and Sapir were excluded from vital and highly sensitive information and therefore could not contribute to the discussions in any meaningful manner. This became very apparent on the eve of the Yom Kippur War. In order to overcome leakages to the media, she normally proclaimed those parts of the cabinet agenda, or meetings of the Ministerial Committee for Foreign Affairs and Security, that dealt with security matters as closed meetings, therefore censorable which meant that under Israeli law, they could not be reported or even hinted to.

Her attitude to the media, her decision not to appoint a spokesman to her bureau until July 1973, created the correct impression that the public was not fully aware of what the prime minister was doing to promote peace. She, Galili and others usually used oblique terms when they talked about contacts with other governments. They referred to “foreign” or “friendly factors”. The media was fed with many rumors and the prime minister did little to deny many of them. The impression was thus created and still persists that Golda did little to advance peace. She never sought publicity, but she did not realize that she was the prime minister of a country that was always in the news and that dealing with the press was an important part of government work. Whereas, when she was abroad, she

was a master of handling the local media, at home she did not make skillful use of the media in her diplomatic moves. Her attitude to the media was “Bolshevik”: if you cannot control the media, keep a safe distance from them. Years later, when her efforts to move towards some arrangements with the Egyptians and her meetings with King Hussein became known, it was too late. She was no longer prime minister and although she did try to refute some of the charges against her after leaving office, it was too late.

Normally, her ministers were loyal to the government policy not only because of the collective responsibility rule that prevailed in Israeli politics, but also because they did respect her and feared that if they engaged in public criticism, she might misinterpret their words and they could be punished at some point in the future. She had established direct lines of communications with a number of senior officials and could bypass their ministers if that was what she wanted. In her capacity as prime minister, she was responsible for the Mossad and the General Security Services (Shin Bet). She maintained direct, almost daily contact with Ambassador Rabin in Washington, with the IDF chief of staff, with the inspector general of the police. Almost no one criticized her policy and policy-making process in public. One of the rare critics was Arye (Lova) Eliav, who was not afraid to confront the prime minister on such issues as the existence of the Palestinian people. In a series of articles he wrote in “*Davar*”, he proposed talks with their leaders and was sternly rebuked by the prime minister. In off-the-record talks, a number of ministers expressed annoyance of being bypassed, of not being informed of major developments, of faulty decision-making processes and irregular procedures.

The weekly cabinet meetings were mostly rituals that enabled the prime minister to divulge only highly selective information, yet also enabled her to obtain cabinet approval for decisions made elsewhere in smaller groups. The cabinet had to approve the annual state budget, draft laws and approve the appointments of senior officials and ambassadors, and of course confirm certain foreign affairs and security moves. Descriptions provided later by some senior ministers in their memoirs, among them Eban, Dayan and Peres, do not paint a flattering portrait of the cabinet or its head. The ministers normally refrained from voicing criticism of a certain policy and therefore the cabinet was never the central forum where key decisions would be made on issues of war and peace. Her arch rival, Shimon Peres, drew a highly critical portrait of the prime minister when he noted in his diary:

Her glances testify to her attitudes. She had an enormous talent to listen...she smokes a lot and incessantly. When someone of the cabinet members ‘goes wild’ and expresses a comment—she gives him a bloodcurdling stare. She loves meetings and she loves long meetings. Her standing as prime minister, as a woman, and as one who loves sharp controversy

and argumentation—is beyond argument. Cabinet members look to her now, some with awe, some out of fear and some with no other alternative...in spite of her advanced age (74) she is very lucid in her speech and her memory is intact.<sup>50</sup>

The main speakers on foreign affairs and security were junior ministers, such as Minister of Tourism Moshe Kol or Religious Affairs Zerach Warhaftig, whose understanding of intricate international issues was somewhat limited. She allowed them to unburden themselves. There was another feature in cabinet meetings: ministers used to report of their overseas trips. That took up much time and contributed nothing to the cabinet work. When it came to domestic affairs such as the economy, education, employment and social services, the cabinet was much more effective. The ministers had at their disposal all the material required, there was usually very good preparatory staff work and the results were more impressive. Golda, who had much knowledge in many domestic issues, was a very keen participant in those discussions. Here she feared no leaks. But the media was much less interested in these tame and uninteresting topics.

In the worst case, if ministers differed from the position of the prime minister, they could either resign or threaten to resign, but few chose these weapons. They knew well that Golda was a first-class expert in resignations and knew that for her, these were idle threats, unless the minister was senior, such as Moshe Dayan. His resignation could lead to the resignation of the other Rafi ministers and this she wanted to prevent. Few were the ministers who resigned during her term as prime minister. Among them was Justice Minister Yaacov Shimshon Shapira, who resigned for a while in 1972 and resigned for good after the Yom Kippur War due to criticism he leveled at Dayan. The ministers knew well that once they resigned, their standing, power and influence in their party and in Israel would disappear within a few days. As long as someone was in office and had a certain power base, they did not have to worry about a salary unless they had their own financial means. Virtually no one was affluent. Golda never encouraged wealthy people to join her cabinet as they could never be trusted or controlled. Justice Minister Shapira who did resign was a wealthy lawyer and could afford to go. Apart from the Gachal ministers who quit in August 1970 for ideological reasons, no one resigned from her cabinet. The only way left to those who were unhappy with the policy pursued by the cabinet was to remain and try to influence decisions from within. The Labor Party ministers proved to be very cautious. Those who argued a lot represented small parties such as the Independent Liberals or the National Religious Party. They had nothing to lose. In any case, the prime minister could not fire them because of the coalition agreement. But she never rated them highly.

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<sup>50</sup> Bar-Zohar, *The Phoenix*.

She had more respect for ministers of her own party, but they normally preferred to remain silent. The absence of a healthy debate around the cabinet table only served to isolate Golda from other more varied opinions that were not expressed and that could have contributed to more fruitful discussions and decisions. They knew that Golda's fanaticism when it came to secrecy meant that even they were not privy to many secrets and could not prepare themselves for the cabinet meeting. The Labor Party ministers knew they served in the cabinet because of Golda and did not want to harm their future political career. The history of Israel is replete with ex-ministers, or even ex-prime ministers, whose influence on decisions is almost nonexistent. No one wanted to be an ex-minister. Resignation was also seen as something that was not done, not common in the Labor Party. Resignation for ideological reasons was also unacceptable. Those who threatened to walk out were told that those who remained in the cabinet were no less patriotic or ideological than they. The main effort of the prime minister was to maintain stability and prevent shocks. This was her style since her childhood days in Kiev.

The central organ for decision-making was Golda's "kitchen" that met usually in her living room (next to the kitchen) in the prime minister's residence in Jerusalem on Saturday night, a day before the weekly cabinet meeting.<sup>51</sup> The permanent participants were ministers Dayan, Allon, Galili and Shapira. On occasion, Eban and Sapir were invited. Others invited according to need were the chief of staff, director of military intelligence, head of the Mossad, director general of the Prime Minister's Office, Golda's political and military aides. This body operated with no fixed agenda, position papers and prior staff work. The discussions were not recorded or even taken down by a stenographer, although the decisions made were noted and recorded. Golda did not want the participants to talk to history but to the point. The advantage in such a body was its relatively small size, and the ability to express one's views freely since most of the participants were members of the Labor Party. One unhealthy phenomenon was the involvement of senior civil servants and generals in the deliberations of a body that was essentially a party organ. They all knew that the discussions were mostly consultations that were noncommittal and whose main purpose was to help the prime minister crystallize her own thinking and position, before she raised a certain item in the cabinet or in a Ministerial Committee meeting the next day. The "kitchen" was, according to its participants Eban and Gazit, a sort of a "National Security Council". If indeed it was this type of a body, it lacked any juridical and constitutional authority. Various items were freely raised and at the end of the meeting the prime minister

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<sup>51</sup> On "Golda's Kitchen", see Ben-Meir, *Decision-Making*, pp. 130–133; Ben-Porat, *Conversations*, pp. 92–96 and 215–216.

would sum up the consensus she thought had been achieved. Few argued over the summations. She was known for her ability to reach simplified conclusions and make complex issues understandable to all. She never gave the impression that she was imposing her ideas on others. Her way of doing things was to “let us sit together and reason”. Her talents were to convince, persuade and argue. These were central foundations of her leadership. If a conclusion arose that she was opposed to, she could always point out its dangers to the party and nation, create a threat of war or help the right-wing opposition. These processes may have been very valid in Israel, but did not always work out overseas. There she did not control the key personalities and had to activate her power of conviction, and the appeal to sentiments and arguments such as pogroms or the Holocaust.

Attempts by Dinitz and Gazit, and even by Dayan, to establish an organ that would enable her to reach decisions in a more orderly manner were rejected by her. On a certain issue, she claimed that she alone “was capable of weighing things and reach a decision with no need for the services of a staff body”.<sup>52</sup> Perhaps she was afraid that in such a body there would be a number of academics and her intellectual inferiority would become evident. While she would act on the basis often of her gut feelings, they would come with theories that were tested in a scientific manner. A new organ would create unnecessary problems and conflicts and it would mean mass distribution of highly sensitive material. This was contrary to her ways of thinking and operating. Her unwillingness to adopt this idea can also be seen as part of her anti-intellectualism. The summations achieved in the “kitchen” were raised in the cabinet session the next morning. Those ministers who were not present in the “kitchen” knew there was not much point in arguing. The prime minister had already made up her mind. She would listen to them respectfully and patiently but no more than that.

How and from where did she obtain her information? A great deal came from “mouth to ear”. Much of the information was obtained by conversations and oral reports by her aides, and little from reading written material. Her aides often prepared brief summaries for her that they filtered for her from huge amounts of information that flowed to her office from the IDF, Mossad, Foreign Ministry and other bodies. The material included cables, assessments, contents of foreign broadcasts, mainly Arab radio and later television stations, reports of meetings and discussions, letters and newspaper clips and summaries. The selection was done by the chief of her bureau and his assistant, on occasion by the military secretary and other officials. In her regular meetings with key officials, among them the heads of the intelligence community, IDF generals, not to mention the

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<sup>52</sup> Ben-Meir, *Decision-Making*, p. 133.

party secretary general and others who dealt with matters that interested her in particular such as Soviet Jewry, she received much information and could pose pertinent questions. In long meetings, she rarely made notes and relied on her excellent memory. She judged people by, among other things, their outward appearance, their clothing and their manners. People were also judged by their loyalty and their integrity. The Rafi people always remained suspect and accused of disloyalty. On occasion, the career of someone identified as “Dayan’s man” was hurt even if in reality this was not so. She loved to meet foreign visitors—heads of state, ministers, members of parliament, journalists, who also provided information. On rare occasions, she would show interest in the small details of the daily running of her office, but she was interested to know and approve who would sit next to who in official events especially if they were held in her residence. She also went through the lists of invitees. When she wanted to remove someone from participating in a meeting or an event, she never said he should be excluded. When the name of a person she disliked was raised, she asked, “Is it necessary?” The hint was evident.

Her closest aides included Simcha Dinitz who was appointed her Bureau chief in the fall of 1969 and remained there until April 1973. She inherited her military secretary Brigadier General Yisrael Lior from Eshkol. He made the necessary coordination with the General Headquarters, the Mossad, the GSS. There was Lou Kadar whose job was never really defined. She served as a personal assistant, secretary, companion, responsible for meetings and the social calendar, and buying gifts for visitors or overseas personalities. She always traveled with Golda. She, Dinitz and Lior in effect determined who would see the prime minister or what material she would see. Their previous experience was in foreign affairs and security, and they preferred to arrange meetings in these spheres rather than domestic issues in which they were less experienced and less interested. This order of priorities also suited Golda. Unlike Eshkol, she did not have in her office officials who dealt with press and information, contacts with world Jewry, experts in social and economic issues. She wanted a small and compact staff to avoid internal tensions and conflicts and mostly leaks to the media as much as possible. This changed under Rabin, Begin, Shamir and their successors when the staff of the Prime Minister’s Bureau expanded. In retrospect, in view of the many conflicts in the inner offices of prime ministers Barak and especially Netanyahu, when senior officials were often replaced, she may have been right in insisting on a small and compact staff. She agreed to take on a spokesman only in July 1973. Until then, Dinitz was her main conduit to the Israeli and foreign media. Among those who also played a role in her office were Cabinet Secretary Michael Arnon and Dinitz’ assistant Ely Mizrachi. This small group, that also included three secretaries and bodyguards, succeeded in creating harmony and a sense of

family, intimate and highly cooperative. Working with Golda was seen by them as a unique privilege. They would be party to the making of history even though their influence on the prime minister was minimal. She preferred Dinitz and Lou Kadar who had worked with her in the Foreign Ministry because she did not want to make experiments with people she did not know. She did not ask them or others for revolutionary ideas or original thinking. She did not like war games. She wanted to examine a problem from each possible angle. Her closest team had no intellectual pretensions. The only intellectual giant in the office was the Director General Ya'acov Herzog whose influence waned rapidly under Golda. He was appointed director general by Eshkol in 1965 and served Eshkol, and Golda, loyally. While the relations between Golda and him were correct, they lacked warmth on her part. Herzog possessed a brilliant mind, served as Ben-Gurion's closest political aide during the Sinai War, was Israel's minister in Washington and ambassador in Canada. Later he was deputy director general in the Foreign Ministry under Golda and in 1964 was offered the position of chief rabbi of Great Britain and the Commonwealth which he declined. His intellectual prowess did not help him in Golda's office. On the contrary, he had difficulties in making decisions, weighing all issues thoroughly. He was once asked to explain the difference between working with Ben-Gurion, Eshkol and Golda. He said that with the first two leaders he could share his concerns over the future of the Jewish people and they listened carefully and attentively. Golda's answer usually was: "Ya'acov, I do not know what will happen tomorrow, so how can you expect me to talk about the Jewish people in the coming generations?" When it came to purely philosophical discussions, she lacked vision and imagination. She looked upon such discussions as sterile academic exercises that one should not waste time on. As Herzog's influence waned, Dinitz's grew. When Herzog died in 1972 at the early age of 52, she appointed Dinitz as director general of the Prime Minister's Office and he continued to serve as her senior political adviser until he was appointed ambassador to Washington a year later.

The man with the highest degree of influence on Golda was Yisrael Galili. He was a member of kibbutz Na'an, one of the leaders of the Hagannah, of Faction B in Mapai until 1944, and after that one of the key leaders in Mapam and later Achdut Ha'avodah. Formally, he was minister without portfolio responsible for the government information services in Israel since 1965. Galili was chief of staff of the Hagannah at the beginning of the War of Independence but was removed from this position by Ben-Gurion shortly after independence to ensure that control of the Israel army remain in the hands of Mapai. Galili was elected to the Knesset in 1949 and served there until 1981. He had a brilliant and sharp mind, was a gifted orator in Hebrew and master of formulation. He became Eshkol's chief speech writer and held this position under Golda as well as later during Rabin's first term

as prime minister. As much as he had vast knowledge and understanding of the secrets and maze of Israeli politics and specialized in foreign affairs and security, he lacked experience in foreign relations and international affairs. His command of the English language was somewhat limited; he rarely traveled abroad and was seen as doctrinaire and dogmatic in his views. Golda met him in the 1930's as a rising Mapai leader and one of the heads of the Hagannah. Their friendship lasted for decades. She trusted implicitly his loyalty, his ability to keep secrets and his willingness to do his utmost for her at any time and in any place. His lack of knowledge in international affairs often led him to clash with Eban and the higher echelon of the Foreign Ministry who saw a dangerous rival in him, a man of radical ideas, lacking depth and originality. Like Golda, he saw the Arab world in black and white. There was no major decision from 1965 until 1977 that Galili was not involved in or had written the concluding statement for. He naturally became her speechwriter and wrote all of her major addresses in Israel. He also formulated many cabinet statements. One of his problems was his lack of ability to use simple Hebrew to express his views. His Hebrew was convoluted, elliptical, and required much knowledge of the secrets of the language to understand his meaning. One of the results was that Golda read his speeches in the Knesset in a monotonous voice devoid of any inspiration.

Among the veterans was another very close friend—Mapam's leader Yaacov Hazan. She found common language with him as they were of the same age, same generation and same movement background. His biographer, Zeev Tsachor, wrote in his book "Hazan—A Life Movement", that there was ground to believe that Golda shared with Hazan Israel's most sensitive issues that were not even shared with her cabinet colleagues. She relied on his integrity, honesty, understanding, good common sense, listening ability and finally his capacity to give her good and sound advice. She knew he would never leak information to the media. Hazan still maintained good contacts with the Defense Ministry and the IDF and he often shared with her information she did not get through the proper channels of the IDF or the defense minister. She knew she could rely on him much more than on Dayan, Eban or Peres. But Hazan, like Golda, could barely find common language with the younger generation of Israelis. Both knew that they were becoming increasingly irrelevant to the younger Israelis.

Golda demanded that her team devote long hours to their work at the expense of their free time and family life. But they were rewarded by her with an unforgettable experience—the ability to witness a great drama, the privilege of being next to a woman who already was a legendary international figure. Because of her they traveled in Israel and overseas, had a lively social life and rubbed shoulders with members of Israel's high society as well as international figures. Dinitz and Lou Kadar were invited to address the United Jewish Appeal and Israel Bonds



events. Their names were often in the Israeli media where they were sought after for press interviews. She relied on them to interpret and analyze the national mood for her. Some of her aides were reluctant to be honest with her and describe some of the more seamy sides of Israeli politics and society so as not to anger or upset her. In the final years as prime minister, when there was some deterioration in her eyesight due to cataract, she did not always see all the material that was in any case filtered. This meant that her aides selected the material they read to her. Her team preferred not to quarrel with her either publicly or even in her inner office, although they did argue with her on various issues. Lior felt that he still had some good years left in him to remain in the IDF and therefore preferred not to quarrel with the defense minister (whom he intensely disliked) or the chief of staff. At 42, Dinitz was still a young man who did not shy away from confrontations with the foreign minister or the senior echelon of that ministry because he knew he had the full backing of the prime minister. Apart from Dinitz, who had political aspirations, the rest of the team did not need and did not seek or receive Golda's backing for promotion or advancement. Her team was never called Golda's Boys. Dinitz did end up as ambassador to Washington, Knesset member and finally chairman of the Jewish Agency and the World Zionist Organization Executive.

In the conditions that prevailed in Golda's office, there was little room for independent thinking or criticism. They knew well that Golda constantly needed expressions of appreciation, confirmation of her thinking and much adulation and admiration to allow her to overcome her sense of inferiority that at times haunted her. The team gave her this moral support which she needed and craved, apart from Lou Kadar who retained her independent thinking and was one of the few who could criticize the prime minister with no fear of retribution. But Lou lacked deep understanding of domestic and international developments and their influence on the future of the country. Herzog, Dinitz and Lior had good political sense but did not want to veer from Golda's line. When things went wrong and ended in total collapse on the eve of the Yom Kippur War, Golda was flabbergasted. She had relied on her aides and they had failed to read the entire picture properly.

During her term as prime minister, there were no major changes in her lifestyle, and as in the past there was little separation between her private and public life. She hated to be alone apart from the hours she slept or dozed in cars. She insisted on the presence of her team in trips, flights, in the office and also at home. Contrary to Ben-Gurion, who was a loner, hated company and preferred his books and writings to idle chats, she was more like Eshkol. Both loved company, she was at her best at night, either in her residence in Jerusalem or at home in Ramat Aviv. When she traveled abroad, she always used regular El-Al

flights and never asked for a special plane, a custom that began to be prevalent much later. She was never followed by a horde of reporters and photographers. A Government Press Office photographer usually accompanied her to record certain major events for the sake of history. During her stays in hotels abroad she usually invited close friends with whom she chatted until the early hours of the morning. As time elapsed, the chats increasingly became monologues, nostalgic, tales of people she had met and events in which she had participated or had witnessed. These chats were fascinating and the listeners were charmed and enthralled by her memory, her capacity to describe events. No one dared leave before she gave the sign. Often in Jerusalem at 11 pm she would phone her old friend Regina—“Regina, what are you doing? I am sending the car, come over”.

Her schedule was now more orderly: Cabinet on Sunday, Knesset plenary sessions on Mondays, Tuesdays and early Wednesdays. Appearances before the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Security Committee, weekly meetings in Tel Aviv with the head of the Mossad, the head of the GSS, the IDF chief of staff, party affairs on Friday morning and her “kitchen” in Jerusalem on Saturday night. Her schedule included many press interviews to local and foreign correspondents, radio and television appearances, addressing United Jewish Appeal and Israel Bonds delegations, and many visits to kibbutzim, moshavim, factories and other sites in Israel. Monday was usually devoted to medical treatment to ensure that the cancer remained in remission, which it did. That day she came to work late. The treatment took place either in the early morning or late at night at Hadassah Medical Center in Ein Kerem. The excuse was to visit a sick friend. Many weekends she spent in the company of her daughter, son-in-law and grandchildren in Revivim. The kibbutz gave her the use of an apartment, she had her meals with the members in the kibbutz communal dining room.

She displayed a warm and often motherly attitude to her close friends, colleagues and above all her inner team that included, for that purpose, the driver, the cook, the housekeeper, the lady who served her coffee in her office, her personal bodyguards and the policemen who were posted outside her residence. She made sure they were properly dressed in the winter cold. She remembered weddings and birthdays and other family events and sent small gifts and wrote a few words on her visiting card. She insisted that all the thousands of letters sent to her by Israelis and foreigners alike were answered. On holiday eves, she would send wine bottles or flowers to close friends and her team. She did not do so for political reasons, she no longer needed this, but because of her humane and caring nature.

Much has been written about her ties with the Israeli media. In spite of her charm and charisma and her ability to control every discussion or social event, she was unsuccessful in establishing close ties with the Israeli media. She relied

on her unassailable position in the country and party and knew the media could not undermine it. While she did grant many interviews to the local press, she preferred the foreign media: they would be more polite and less inquisitive and ask fewer embarrassing questions. She rarely held press conferences in Israel, but did so willingly abroad. She did not rely on the reporters in Israel who could be prying and pose questions over which she had no control. The other options were to seek questions in advance or not to hold press conferences at all. Unlike the American president, she had no time, inclination and desire to prepare for such conferences and study in depth certain issues that were bound to be raised. She felt she could manage somehow. Her main argument with the Israeli journalists was that they were petty, often mean, provocative, seeking sensations. She failed to understand that the Israeli media that was mobilized for the national struggle during the final years of the British Mandate and the early years of Israel was no longer ready to be tame. The media now became one of the gatekeepers of Israeli democracy whose task was to reveal misdeeds and even corruption in high places. Her ‘Bolshevik’ attitude was that the media that does not serve the movement or the state is basically hostile. She was fearful of the media because of her aversion to criticism. She feared noncomplimentary comparisons that would be made between her and Ben-Gurion. She was always concerned that she would be depicted in the media as a spiteful, poorly educated, limited woman, dressed in unfashionable clothes, with a very limited vocabulary. No wonder that women soldiers referred to the shoes they were issued that were not very fashionable as “Golda’s Shoes”.

While in Israel voices began to be heard that questioned the political common sense of the prime minister, her understanding and handling of key issues, abroad and mainly among Jewish communities in the United States, she became an icon. At least three biographies that were written about her when she was prime minister were by women and highly complimentary. Marie Syrkin (who updated the biography she published on Golda in 1955), Iris Nobel and Peggy Mann made her name famous worldwide. It can be safely stated that she had become a legend during her lifetime. Scores of interviews brought her bulky figure to the homes of millions of viewers. Her humility, sense of humor, modesty, and even her constant smoking and cups of coffee, made her a household name and one of the five most influential women in the world. The combination of the woman, stateswoman, Jewish mother defending her children, the schoolteacher from Milwaukee who preferred the hard life in a kibbutz in faraway Israel, lit the imagination of millions of people, Jews and non Jews alike. Her biographers preferred to ignore some of the more problematic aspects of her life and character and emphasized her dynamic and thoughtful leadership.

As the admiration for Golda grew overseas, there was a growing gap in the way Israelis saw her leadership. Many Jewish leaders from overseas were often shocked to hear that while abroad Golda was an icon, in Israel she was the subject of criticism, jokes and on occasion derision. Few of them understood the nature of the new Israeli society in the early 1970's. It gradually became a consumer society, and was on the eve of becoming a leading hi-tech society. They did not understand the alienation between Golda and members of the younger generation of Israelis and saw every criticism of Golda as a sinister political act motivated by unknown reasons. Few of them understood the changes that had occurred in Golda herself over the years.

In the course of her career, she developed a habit of avoiding to deal with ideological issues. When she became prime minister, this fit very much the national mood of Israel that was growing tired of ideology and wanted peace and quiet after decades of tiring struggles. The establishment of Rafi was a retreat from ideology, and such was the union that led to the creation of Gachal in 1965, when Herut gave up its radical ideology of two sides of the Jordan. Throughout her life, Golda sought to avoid confrontations and quarrels and preferred to settle them on the basis of creating a consensus. Now she was daily busy in efforts to reach compromises and mediate between many individuals and interest groups, mostly to preserve the coalition unity. After a long process of internal discussions, she attempted to draw all the parties that made up her coalition government to reach a basic common denominator, usually the lowest, attained as a compromise that resulted from a complex process and negotiations between the many inter- and intra-party groups. She often claimed that a beleaguered Israel did not have the luxury of internal dissent. Her method was to rein in the personal desires of the various faction leaders to reach a consensus. Being very pragmatic and being a typical Mapai leader, she did not like politics of principles. The moment you argue on principles there is a danger that 'the street' will take over and stability disappears. Her message to the Israelis was a mixture of an exalted vision of peace and security, stability and calm, justice and equality, but all this in the framework of the existing political system whose leadership knew what the people wanted (unlike Ben-Gurion who said he did not know what the people wanted but what the people needed). She argued, and rightly so, that the Israelis wanted to be led by constructive leaders, by builders and not by destroyers. For her, Herut symbolized an unlimited destructive force.

The key word for her was "responsibility" that was interpreted by her to mean everything the Labor Party did, and "irresponsibility" was everything that others did. One of the problems she unsuccessfully confronted for years was her relations with intellectuals in Israel and abroad. As a child in Russia and later in America, she learned to respect the written word. In America she acquired respect

for pragmatism and public service and these became in her eyes far more important than formal education. Intellectuals were seen by her as doubters, hesitant, devoid of the capacity to make decisions. She was not among those who dealt with the study of long-term processes. She dealt with immediate problems that required solutions and with concrete issues. At times she accused the intellectuals of irresponsibility by sowing doubts in the mind of young Israelis about basic tenets of Zionism and the unassailable right of the Jewish nation to a homeland in Israel. Anyone who objected to her view was seen by her as an inciter who could lead the youth to deal with sterile matters that had no relation to the present. Luckily for her, apart from Eban and perhaps Galili, in her cabinet there were no great and shining lights, so she could feel more assured. She never had much esteem for Allon who publicly derided Eban and Galili and was not seen as an intellectual by her. She was a doer and sought solutions to burning issues and did not deal with eternal and universal problems. Her fear of intellectuals was similar to her attitude to the media. They could expose her as a limited, half-educated woman, as Sharett wrote once. Her occasional meetings with Israeli writers were usually unsuccessful due to the vast gap in their views.

Golda was a first-class hostess. In 1971, she heard that Ifigenie Sulzbeger, the mother of the “New York Times” publisher, was visiting Israel, and invited her for coffee with some close friends. “The two old ladies”—wrote a witness—“knew each other from the media... Mrs. Meir ignored her bodyguards and opened the door of her official residence herself. The leader of the Jewish state and the heiress of the anti-Zionist family among American Jews began to shake hands, then looked at each other like two grandmothers and hugged for a long time”.<sup>53</sup>

She did all she could to make her visitors feel at home, even though they were guests of the much-admired prime minister of Israel. When visitors arrived, she would rise from her chair behind her desk, welcome them with a strong handshake and a big smile. Even if she did not know the visitors, she tried at once to establish a personal rapport by asking one or two questions. When the publisher of the “Washington Post” Katharine Graham, one of the most powerful women in America, came to see her accompanied by the editor in chief of “Newsweek”, Graham was tense prior to the meeting and wondered aloud to her Israeli escorts what she would talk about with Golda. When the meeting began, she sat opposite Golda like a schoolchild facing the principal. Golda looked at her and asked gently, “and how is your mother?” The atmosphere mellowed and everyone relaxed.

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<sup>53</sup> Peter Grose, *Israel in the Mind of America*, New York, 1983, p. 308.

In 1971, Senator Frank Church, later the chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, was invited to her residence for breakfast. He came alone and while Golda asked him if he could help, he responded positively. She asked him to go to the living room and told him that breakfast was ready and that there were a number of things he could help her with, among them “Phantom” jets, ground-to-air missiles and mainly help in getting Soviet Jews out of Russia.

Did the fact that she was a woman influence her functioning? Was there any linkage between her tough stand on many issues and the mild and compromising attitudes that befitted a woman more? Many leaders praised her motherly traits and she became an object of admiration partly because she was a woman. Her rivals claimed that since he was unable to fulfill herself as a woman at home, she did her utmost to cover up for her failure as a wife and a parent and to appear tough. She often said that the greatest privilege women had was to bear children. Her personal experience was not a great privilege but to the contrary. It became a source of guilty feelings and much suffering. She knew she could never have a career and be a mother at the same time. To her, being the national mother and grandmother of Israel did not hurt her either.<sup>54</sup>

During her five-year-term as prime minister, she did not visit any African, Asian, Latin American, let alone Middle Eastern, countries. Her overseas trips were exclusively to European countries and to the United State. Because of the suspension of ties between Israel and the Eastern European bloc after the Six Days War, there was no direct contact with either the Soviet Union or its Communist Eastern European satellites apart from Romania, where she traveled at the invitation of President Ceaucescu. In the course of a visit to Finland, where she spent several days in the estate of the Jewish industrialist Puyo Zabludovic near the town of Rovaniemi, rumors spread that she held secret talks with Soviet emissaries. She never denied it, although there was no need to travel to faraway Finland to meet the emissaries of Brezhnev. A number of them came to Israel and held secret meetings with the director general of her office and Foreign Ministry officials. It became obvious that the Soviet Union very much regretted severing ties with Israel, a move that excluded her from the political process and denied much intelligence from her because she no longer had diplomats stationed in Israel. For her part, Israel was in no hurry to seek the re-establishment of ties with the Russians and conditioned them on the opening of the gates to Soviet Jews. Other European trips brought her to gatherings of the Socialist International, a body of which Golda was a vice president. Those annual conferences afforded her the chance to meet with the key European Socialist leaders, among them the

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<sup>54</sup> Fallaci, Interview, pp. 86–87.

Swedish Prime Minister Olaf Palme, German Chancellor Willy Brandt, Austrian Chancellor Bruno Kreisky and other heads of European states.

The relations between Israel and the African nations, that had been her crowning achievement in her ten years as foreign minister, began to deteriorate shaply after the Six Days War. Israel was now occupying Arab territories that Arab propaganda termed partly African. They meant the Sinai Peninsula that before the war had belonged to Egypt. The Arab and some African states utilized the secret military ties between Israel and the Apartheid regime of South Africa to smear Israel. Virtually all the African nations began to vote in favor of all anti-Israel resolutions in the United Nations and in every international forum, including the Organization of African Unity. That body even tried its hand in peacemaking between Israel and her Arab neighbors when, in January 1971, it sent a delegation consisting of the presidents of Cameroon, Nigeria, Zaire and Senegal. Golda received them with warmth, but the mission was doomed as they accepted the basic Arab premises and demands. The zeal and excitement that had marked the initial contacts between Israel and the African nations quickly evaporated. Foreign Minister Eban displayed virtually no interest in the continent. The quality of the Israeli technicians, IDF representatives and trainers and those of commercial firms gradually declined and it showed. The heads of the African nations finally came to the realization that development required years if not decades of slow and painful investments. They needed to show immediate achievements. When these were not forthcoming, they looked for scapegoats and found them in the shape of the Israelis. Guinea severed ties with Israel shortly after the Six Days War (and was one of the last to renew them in 2016). Uganda followed suit in March 1972 when Israel rejected the requests of its president Idi Amin for advanced weapons to enable him to launch a war against Tanzania. Chad and Congo suspended ties at the end of 1972. Before the Yom Kippur War, five African nations had already suspended ties with Israel. Golda of course saw this as a glaring sign of ingratitude but preferred not to react publicly. The big blow would come during the Yom Kippur War when sixteen African nations announced they were suspending diplomatic relations with Israel.

The relations between Israel and France reached a low point during her term as prime minister and she was not even invited to Paris. One of the main reasons was the affair known as the Cherbourg Boats. Before the Six Days War, Israel had ordered a number of patrol boats from a French shipyard in Cherbourg. As a result of the embargo that De Gaulle imposed on arms shipments to Israel because of the war, and after the boats were completed and paid for, a decision was made in the Defense Ministry and the Israel Navy to bring them to Israel. A dummy company was established and registered in Panama, ostensibly to look for oil. The boats were sold to this company with the approval of the French government.

On Christmas Eve, 1969, when the citizens of Cherbourg were celebrating the holiday, 80 Israeli seamen dressed in civilian clothing smuggled the boats out of the harbor. The world followed intently and with much glee as the boats made their way through the Bay of Biscayne and the Mediterranean until they arrived in Haifa in January 1970. At the head of the welcoming party in Haifa was prime minister Golda Meir who initially approved this operation code named “Noah’s Ark”. The president of France Georges Pompidou was livid with rage and deeply insulted. The head of the Israel Defense Ministry delegation was expelled from France and some French officials in Cherbourg suspended. The French never forgot or forgave this episode that made them the laughing stock of Europe for a while. Ties with Britain were warmer, but no more than that. The British prime minister at the time, Ted Heath, explained to Golda on a number of occasions that Israel must withdraw from all the occupied territories and stop settlement in these areas. An important visitor from Britain was a rising star in the Conservative Party who, as minister of education, came to Israel and was deeply impressed by the Israeli Iron Lady. This was Margaret Thatcher, who several years later would become Britain’s Iron Lady.

Contrary to the evaluation that prevailed for many years, Golda Meir’s main failures as prime minister were mostly in the domestic sphere and less in foreign policy and defense. No wonder that she devoted exactly two pages in her memoirs to the internal affairs of the years 1969–1974. Some of these failures can be attributed to the faulty performance and functioning of the Labor Party that demonstrated growing ideological fatigue and stalemate, as it, too, was primarily absorbed in foreign affairs and security. The Labor party and its leaders, apart from a very few exceptions, began to show signs of growing atrophy and conservatism that bordered on ideological fossilization. They did not make any attempt to utilize the union of the three labor movements that now operated in the framework of the Labor Party, to infuse new life into many spheres. The country was still under the intoxicating spell of the victory in the Six Days War, that in itself might have been the right time to rejuvenate the values and principles of the party. But the exact opposite occurred. In his classical book on political parties, the French writer Maurice Duverger wrote that when a left-wing party becomes dominant, its appetite for revolution freezes. The dominant party wears itself out and loses its vitality and suffers from sclerosis of the arteries. In the process it sows the seeds of self destruction.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Maurice Duverger, *Political Parties: Their Organization and Activity in the Modern State*, London 1955, p. 312.



Golda was aware of the spiritual crisis that only deepened, but did almost nothing to return the party to its spiritual sources, the Zionist-Socialist ideals, and to adapt itself to the 1970's. She may have missed a historic opportunity by not utilizing the fact that for the first time in Israeli history, the Labor Party did not need the smaller parties in order to form a coalition. That was the time to seek and attain radical changes in the socio-cultural, and perhaps even the political makeup of the country. It can be understood that immediately after assuming office, she saw herself as an interim prime minister and did not want to embark on radical changes. No wonder that she was not interested in any revolutionary changes in the way the party conducted itself. In her defense, it can be said that until October 1969, the party focused its attention on winning the Knesset elections. After that, Golda was up to her neck dealing with the first Rogers Plan, the War of Attrition, the Goldmann Affair, the second Rogers Plan, the cease-fire and its violations by the Egyptians which led to a crisis of confidence between Israel and the United States. Then came the Jordan crisis, and at the end of September 1970 changes in the leadership of Egypt following the unexpected death of Nasser and his succession by Anwar Sadat. In November 1970, the Jarring talks resumed and soon entered into a stalemate. They were abandoned in February 1971. Only then could Golda devote more time and energy to deal with ideological matters. But she was not built for that. Furthermore, there were no other impressive leaders in the Labor Party who could be of help to her in this intricate area of ideological change. One of the historians of the labor movement had this to say:

Golda Meir, who during the era of the Third Aliyah was unknown and her growth as a leader was exceptional, was helped by the same leaders whose entry into the labor movement in the 1920's and 1930's was like hers—with no existing political power and without being bearers of a message that offers an anti-thesis both personally and ideologically to the labor movement leadership. And thus, absurd as it may sound, people that did not lead politically powerful groups, whose ideological profile was blurred—such as Zalman Aranne, Pinchas Sapir, Yaacov Shimshon Shapira—became leaders of the movement. In this manner, the party lost its attraction and slowly became depleted until, in 1977, it lost its hegemony in Israeli society and the leadership of the country.<sup>56</sup>

The party apparatus also ignored the ideological dimension and made no serious effort to define the ideological worldview of the Labor Party in the new era. They did exactly the opposite. Their feeling was that they must retain the reins of power at all costs, otherwise they would lose them to the right. It became increasingly evident that in the struggle to retain power they abandoned dealing with matters of values and morality, examining the new social and political reality from the

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<sup>56</sup> Zeev Tsachor, *The Roots of Israeli Politics*, Tel Aviv, 1987, p. 67.

point of view of what is right and wrong, good and evil, just or unjust, equality or social gap, the good of the society at large.<sup>57</sup> The moment they had to deal with values, inevitably they would have to deal with the impact of the occupation and its consequences on Israeli society. As early as 1968, Ben-Gurion, still the visionary, had said that Israel must get out of the all the occupied territories apart from the Golan Heights and Hebron, and the sooner the better. He feared for the future of Israeli society. His successors were not willing to enter into such loaded ideological questions that would force them to confront the issue of the occupation.

In those days, Golda was characterized by rigidity when it came to social matters, and a great deal of nostalgia. It was very difficult, for her and most of the aging leaders of the Labor Party, to adapt to new situations that required responses and reactions totally different from what they were used to. Golda, who previously pushed for the attainment of clear-cut, well-defined targets, became an arch conservative. It seemed that she was afraid of the new dynamics of change. Since she was highly sensitive to criticism, she preferred to talk about various flaws, aberrations and faults that she ascribed to outside factors. No wonder that some Israelis began to call the Israeli type of regime an oligarchy, some went even further and called it gerontocracy, or even maternal oligarchy. At the end of 1969, some 75 % of all Israelis were under the age of 45, while the average age of the ministers, heads of the Histadrut and the senior civil servants was 63. The speeches of the prime minister and her colleagues that mainly harked back on the glorious pioneering era seemed to the younger generation highly irrelevant, archaic, disconnected from reality, as if taken from another world.

To camouflage the ideological and moral void, the party's publicists stressed the fact that the present leadership, especially the supreme leader, once again displayed a charisma that had been lacking during Eshkol's time. Through the use of albums, laudatory articles and many interviews there was a concerted effort to endow Golda with the image of a special woman, a born leader whose was only fulfilling a mission entrusted to her by the nation and movement and party. However, once such terms as "fulfilling a mission" and "accepting the party writ" are mentioned, irrational elements arise. Golda could no longer change her way of thinking. When she took on the most senior position, she spoke in general terms of her desire for peace, justice, equality and brotherhood and of the great responsibility that would now be hers. Yet, in her maiden speech in the Knesset when she presented her cabinet, she did not bother to point the direction, to propose targets and a timetable for the implementation of great socio-economic plans. Instead of talking about new ideas, she clung to the trite slogans of the

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57 Yonah Yagol, *The End of the Hegemony—The Future of the Labor Party*, Tel Aviv, 1978, p. 14.

past that stressed Zionism and socialism. She did not offer new solutions for how to deal with urgent social problems that now plagued Israeli society which had become an industrial-technological society. In a party gathering, she said:

It seems to me that one of the main and basic tasks, and an urgent one, the task that faces the movement, ahead of this great party, ahead of this great Alignment, is not to permit the collapse of the foundation in our social creed, and even at times of external perils, maybe because there are external dangers, we must strengthen the foundations from within. And there are foundations of a just society, creative, active, in the cities and in the villages, under whose light we must educate generations even today. No one facing such dangers and such enemies will have no standing power, everyone will sense that there is justice in this society, that something original was created here.<sup>58</sup>

It was noted that she saw herself as a mediator and arbitrator among men, bodies and organizations in the party, cabinet, and the Knesset, and not as one who lays down the law or creates a new ideology. She refused to be drawn into a discussion on what is preferable: strengthening the Histadrut and its many industries or retaining the system of a mixed economy, retaining a taxation system that gave preference to the kibbutzim and moshavim and the Histadrut empire or an attempt to seek a balance with free enterprise due to Israel's huge needs for foreign investments.

Among her close associates, there was no unanimity what policy to pursue. Sapir supported a mixed economy and came to rely increasingly on a layer of wealthy Israelis who were prepared to establish factories mainly in development towns to provide employment to the population there, most of whom were new immigrants from African and Arab countries. Never a doctrinaire in his thinking, he was a highly pragmatic man who was prepared to be flexible and elastic in his principles in order to attain stability, industrial peace and economic growth and even prosperity. Moshe Dayan was busy above his head with running the occupied areas. He understood that the employment of tens of thousands of Palestinians from Gaza and the West Bank would create a deep scar in Israeli society, much of it because they were paid much less than their Israeli counterparts. But in order to maintain tranquility in the territories, he had to find them employment in Israel. Eban devoted himself to diplomacy and less to social and economic issues, although being one of the more outstanding intellectuals in the party, he was already aware of the disintegration of the Labor Party. He would never put up a fight for his principles. Yigal Allon suffered from the Dayan Syndrome, but although being one of the few among the leaders who devoted time to systematic thinking on morality and principles, he lacked the stature and standing

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<sup>58</sup> Statement in the Labor Party Conference, 9 August 1969.

and authority to implement some of his ideas. No one was prepared to fight for his ideas and resign. Galili, never known for original thinking, was the master of formulations and thought that the correct formula would resolve some of the differences.

Golda, who had much to do with the creation of this party as a founding member of Mapai, understood how the party functioned. In her good sense, she realized that reality had now changed and from Mapai the party had become a loose coalition of Mapai, Rafi and Achdut Ha'avodah. That meant constant tensions and a much suspicion among the leaders. In such a situation it would be futile if not impossible to call for a change of principles, let alone a cultural revolution. If Ben-Gurion had failed, Golda certainly would. She knew she never had a historic-ideological worldview like Ben-Gurion had. In as much as she was tough and unyielding in foreign affairs and defense, she became more compromising when she dealt with domestic issues. She was convinced that due to Israel's highly sensitive situation, the country did not need a major shake-up, but a broad-based stable government that could withstand the many external pressures. She was forced to deal daily with new and old issues and was unable to display a broad strategic vision.

Luckily for her, Golda Meir did not have to deal with urgent economic problems after taking office. In the years 1967–1970, there prevailed a sort of an armistice in the relations between the Histadrut on the one hand representing the workers, the government in the middle, and the Manufacturers Association representing the private sector. The attention of most Israelis was focused on the aftereffects of the victory, on issues that had to do with the War of Attrition and the future of the territories. That era also witnessed the beginning of an economic boom that brought a major change to the country's economy. If on the eve of the Six Days War the growth of Israel's gross national product had been close to zero, it rose to 15 % in 1968. While it did drop to 9 % a year later and to 7 % in 1970, still it was very respectable by any standard. Unemployment that had stood at almost 8 % of the total labor force on the eve of the 1967 war almost disappeared and Israel began to adapt itself to the characteristics of a consumer society, which meant a constant rise in the standard of living. Prices remained relatively stable and this lent an atmosphere of security and stability. The prosperity was due to massive government spending that was partly funded by world Jewry, compulsory loans and large-scale economic aid provided by the United States government. The major expense was of course defense. Although Israel won an amazing victory which completely changed her strategic situation, it still had to devote some 30 % of the gross national product to defense. This also meant long reserve duties in the territories and along the Suez Canal, the construction of highly expensive complex defense systems in Sinai and the Golan

Heights and a fence system in the Jordan Valley. In order to finance the defense costs, the government did not have much of a choice but to accept growing inflation due to the growing spending of the new and increasingly prosperous society. There was a marked growth in foreign investments, and tourism grew considerably—many people came to visit greater Israel. The rise in immigration meant rise in housing costs. The beginning of television broadcasts in 1969 was expressed in the import of tens of thousands of sets in addition to cars and home appliances.

The government felt the need to allocate more budgets to social services, mostly to the weaker strata of society, but not only to them. Allocations to higher education grew dramatically and two new universities were established—in Beer Sheva (since 1974 its name was changed to the Ben-Gurion University of the Negev) and in Haifa, and all this in addition to the three existing universities—in Jerusalem, Tel Aviv and Bar Ilan in Ramat Gan. Pensions to the elderly, the retired and social cases also expanded and it seemed as though this was a bottomless barrel. The public became used to getting an automatic salary raise after each price rise through the mechanism of automatic cost of living allocation and continued to demand a rise in its standard of living. The ones who made the loudest demands were the stronger groups such as the labor unions representing the Electric Company, Airport Workers, Arms Industry, teachers and nurses, engineers and Civil Servants Union. The weaker groups tagged behind the stronger ones. Few politicians dared raise question marks about the principles of Israel's economic policies that consisted of constant economic growth, full employment, and unlimited immigration in addition to very generous social welfare handouts. Golda, who championed some of these laws in the 1950's, could not turn her back on them now. No one wanted to rock the boat on the eve of the 1969 Knesset elections. Economists wondered how long the economy would survive, but they did not take into account the money that poured in from world Jewry, tourism, foreign investments and U.S. government grants that enabled the government to maneuver deftly between all the pressures. Pinchas Sapir ruled the economy while his main rival was the secretary general of the Histadrut, Yitzhak Ben-Aharon, a charismatic, well-educated and a true workers' leader, one of the last intellectual giants of the Labor Movement, a great orator who did not hesitate to voice his opinions publicly, even if it meant clashes with the prime minister.

The booming economy had another purpose—that of winning elections. For that purpose, there was need for huge amounts of money that was contributed both in Israel and abroad by a layer of the newly rich Israelis and from foreign supporters of Labor, some of whom made their fortune among other reasons due to their strong ties with the ruling party. No wonder that many of the new rich who supported the Labor Party were those who wanted it to continue to run the

country as they were afraid of Begin's populist slogans. The fund-raising methods of the Labor Party only strengthened the strong ties and cooperation between the finance minister and various economic conglomerates. In the mid-1970's, this would explode and the methods of fund-raising by the Labor Party were exposed. Rabin's candidate for the post of governor of the Bank of Israel was charged with corruption connected to campaign funds and was sentenced to five years in prison. Golda knew well how funds were raised, but preferred not to be personally involved in this seamy side of politics. She left that to Sapir, to Almogi and to other election wizards. The growing ties between the newly rich and the Labor Alignment only pushed the less successful sectors in Israel to the arms of Gachal. They yearned after what Begin promised them: He would "do good for the people."

Golda did not do much to sharpen the ideological differences between the Labor Party and Gachal. On the contrary, until August 1970, she was unwilling to dissolve the Government of National Unity and therefore did not want to stress the ideological contrasts between the left and the right. She found it easy to talk about their differences regarding the future of the territories and security. In the 1969 election campaign, there was hardly a concentrated effort by Labor to explain to the voter the enormous differences, since it was assumed that the Government of National Unity would carry on.

In two important domestic issues, Golda committed serious errors: the handling of the issue known as "church and state" and the treatment of the Mizrahi (Sephardic) Jews. Similar to Ben-Gurion and Eshkol, she accepted the reality which dictated caving in to the demands of the religious parties on matters that they deemed vital for them. Among these matters was the question of "who is a Jew", maintaining the Sabbath, religious education, absolving Yeshiva students from military service and the same for women who declared that their religious sensibilities prevented them from serving in the army. They also compromised on the issue of raising and selling pork, giving total and full authority to the Rabbinical courts in all matters of personal statutes such marriage, divorce, burial, and conversion. Above all Labor did not have a problem with channeling large sums of money to religious institutions. In return for this, the National Religious Party and Aguda allowed the Labor Party an almost total freedom of action in the spheres of foreign policy, defense and the economy. Being a secular Jewess, who smoked and traveled on the Sabbath, who did not observe all the rules of Kashrut as long as she did not act in an official capacity and framework, there was some expectation among secular Israelis that Golda would not yield to the orthodox parties. But soon it turned out that she did view with favor some of their demands that arose while she was prime minister. While admitting that she was not orthodox, she said that she had much respect for the Jewish tradition and therefore

preferred the National Religious Party followers to Reform and Conservative Jews. The older she became, the more she missed the *shtetl*. She did celebrate Sabbath eves in the kibbutz with her family, their weddings and circumcisions and bar mitzvahs were celebrated according to the Jewish orthodox tradition. Her main concern was the preservation of the coalition and the avoidance of a government crisis. Her treatment of television broadcasts on the Sabbath was symptomatic to her approach.

On May 12, 1969, the cabinet adopted a resolution calling for the start of television broadcasts in Israel during weekdays (apart from Yom Kippur). The starting date was November 2, 1969. The first critical test would come on the first Friday, November 7, 1969. Golda was very interested in launching television broadcasts in Israel as she knew the power that this medium had. On November 2, Moshe Chaim Shapira, the leader of the National Religious Party, came to see her and asked that there would be no television broadcasts on Friday evenings, on the Sabbath and on Jewish holidays. At the time, Galili was the minister responsible for implementing the Broadcasting Law, however, he was recovering from a road accident and Golda was acting minister for the purpose of that law. On November 3, she asked the director general of the Israel Broadcasting Authority to hold up the implementation of the decision and not to broadcast on Friday. She claimed that the National Religious Party conditioned their staying in the cabinet on no television on the Sabbath and she had no interest in leading a cabinet without the NRP. Perhaps she already felt that Gachal would soon leave. The director general threatened to resign if there were no broadcasts on the Sabbath. The entire story was leaked to the media and caused a major storm. Golda then mobilized Yaacov Shimshon Shapira, the Justice Minister and a close ally. He called for a cabinet meeting on November 5 that decided once again to ask the Broadcasting Authority to delay broadcasting on the Sabbath and that the entire matter would be discussed by the new cabinet. All the ministers, apart from the Independent Liberal Minister of Tourism Moshe Kol, voted for. The two Mapam ministers were absent. On November 6, in spite of massive pressure leveled at the Council of the Broadcasting Authority, it met and—by 13 for, 9 against, decided to recommend television broadcasts seven days a week, including the Sabbath, excluding Yom Kippur. Golda tried to persuade some of the members of the plenary of the Authority to agree to a delay until she put together her next cabinet. November 6 was a Thursday a day before the Sabbath broadcasts were to start. Golda met with all the members of the Broadcasting Authority Council, especially after the representatives of the minority lodged an appeal against the majority decision to broadcast on Friday night. She decided to bring the matter to the next cabinet session, on the coming Sunday, and went to Revivim to spend the weekend with her daughter.

An Israeli attorney, who was very sensitive to the entire issue, drove to Jerusalem on Friday afternoon and went directly to the home of Supreme Court Justice Zvi Berenson (an old friend of Golda's who served as her director general when she was minister of labor). He obtained from Berenson an *order nisi* that instructed the Broadcasting Authority not to avoid implementing the decision, merely because the prime minister had asked them to do so. Golda was told about this in Revivim. After she asked Galili, who told her that legal decisions must be honored, she told the television people: "Do what is necessary." She even watched the first broadcast. Later she said: "For this we needed all this noise"? The end was simple—there are broadcasts on Fridays and Saturdays and Jewish holidays, apart from Yom Kippur. The NRP remained in the cabinet and Golda realized that in this marginal issue, she had lost. She failed to properly assess Israeli public mood, angered the secular sector and mainly young Israelis who wanted television on the Sabbath. She did not even gain any sympathy from the Orthodox, who in any case did and do not watch television on the Sabbath. She demonstrated total lack of sensitivity to and appeared to have defied the wishes of the majority of Israelis.<sup>59</sup>

There was another religious controversy that she found herself involved in. In June 1972, the Independent Liberal Party proposed a draft law that would enable those who could not for various reasons be married by the Rabbinate, to wed in a civil ceremony. The National Religious Party threatened a cabinet crisis. The prime minister decided that the proposed law was in contradiction to the coalition agreement that said that the religious status quo would be preserved. If the Independent Liberals voted for the law, they would violate the government's collective responsibility agreement and would have to resign. Mapam threatened to vote for the law and it appeared as though the Alignment was on the verge of dissolution, which would mean new elections. All this was avoided when the heads of the Labor Party were able to delay the vote in the Knesset, due to be held on July 6, to after the summer recess. For the time being, the subject was off the agenda. Golda and her allies had hoped that the solution would be found by a more liberal and tolerant attitude on the part of senior orthodox personalities and pinned their hopes on former Chief IDF Military Chaplain Shlomo Goren who was elected with Labor's support as Chief Ashkenazi Rabbi of Tel Aviv. For the sake of resolving a highly controversial problem of a brother and sister who were forbidden to marry because they were considered "Mamzerim" according to Jewish law, the Independent Liberals agreed to postpone the law calling for civil marriage. Golda was

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<sup>59</sup> Zvi Gil, "The War of Independence of the Broadcasting Authority", in Ha'aretz Weekly, 8 October 1981; see also Supreme Court Decisions, Vol. XXIV, Part II, 1970, pp. 651–653.



opposed to any change in the marriage laws; not for religious but for national reasons. Mixed marriages, she was convinced, would endanger the future of the Jewish people and Israel must never be seen as encouraging them.

In that month the ultra-Orthodox party Agudat Israel once again made an attempt to amend the Law of Return in such a manner that only those conversions carried out according to the orthodox interpretation of the Jewish law or the Halacha, and carried out by orthodox rabbis that were recognized by the Orthodox establishment, would be valid in Israel. The majority of the cabinet members were opposed to the amendment, but some of the National Religious Party ministers voted in favor. One of them, Deputy Education Minister Avner Shaki, was removed from his post. Here, Golda was adamant and decisive. Yet, her stand did not prevent many younger Israelis who had spent time in the United States and knew the Reform and Conservative streams, some of them even married to converts who were converted by rabbis belonging to those streams, from expressing growing reservations about Golda's order of priorities. She, they argued, preferred the unity of her coalition even if it split in the Jewish people. In February 1971, she addressed the Knesset on this issue and expressed her fear for the future of the Jewish people and for the maintenance of Jewish values.<sup>60</sup>

Her most serious error was her attitude and treatment of the explosive issue of the younger generation of Sephardic Jews, especially a group that later became known as the "Black Panthers". As minister of labor, Golda had dealt for years with the absorption of the mass immigration that poured into Israel in its early years. She developed deep sentiments for the underdogs and for the many groups who lived in much distress and was sorry to leave that ministry which she saw as a conduit and an instrument for building a just, equal society and providing a decent quality of life for all. In the short term, the immigrant absorption process was by and large successful, given Israel's capabilities at the time, and most of the new immigrants embarked on the slow process of adjusting to the economic and social conditions of the country and even began to climb the rungs of the ladder. Mapai was seen as the power that awarded the immigrants with housing, employment, and vocational training, and they owed it much, a debt many of them paid by voting for Mapai in Knesset elections. The problems began in the late 1950's and worsened in the 1960's, when the more able among the younger generation of Sephardic Jews confronted discrimination based on their ethnic and communal origins for the first time. This was reflected in slow promotions or the type of jobs they found. Golda was very much aware of this growing gap and explained it in the following words:

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<sup>60</sup> Statement in the Knesset, 11 February 1971.

Many of those who came from Moslem countries, brought discrimination and deprivation in their ‘baggage’ from their countries of origin. The Jews who came to us from Moslem countries were of much higher level than the environment from which they came. But their fate was such that they lived in countries that were not yet culturally, educationally and industrially developed, thus depriving them from the opportunity to develop their talents, to give expression to their intellectual ability, to obtain knowledge and education that was given to those who came from developed countries of Europe and America. When we see the achievements attained by many in the Sephardic communities under the conditions prevailing in Israel, we sense how many talents were deprived among our brethren from Moslem nations because of the low level of development in these countries...is it their fault that their lot was not happy because of the convoluted changes of Jewish history? Certainly not.<sup>61</sup>

She could not prevent some of the more ugly phenomena that occurred in 1971. When it appeared that for the time being the borders were quiet, the security tensions abated, and the economic prosperity was being felt, suppressed social tensions suddenly erupted. In Jerusalem’s slum neighborhood Musrara, situated on the Armistice Line with Jordan, a group of young men, children of immigrants from Moslem nations, organized themselves. From the American protest movement they took the name “Black Panthers” and began to demonstrate in the streets of Jerusalem. Their main demand was low-cost housing for young couples. They were aware that newly-arrived immigrants from the Soviet Union and some from prosperous Western countries (i. e. Ashkenazi Jews), received low-cost housing in good city locations and were allowed to import cars and household appliances duty free, things that every young Israeli couple craved. The demonstrations turned violent and the demonstrators clashed with the police that acted with little restraint. In the course of dispersing the demonstrators, it was claimed that the police were discriminating against Sephardim. To reduce the tension, a meeting was arranged for the leaders of the “Black Panthers” with the prime minister. The meeting was held on April 13, 1971. After greeting them, Golda asked where they worked. Their answer was that either they were unemployed or recently fired because of what they termed unfair treatment by the police. The protocol of the meeting reveals the depth of the abyss. Golda launched into a long tale of how she and her friends had found employment when they came to Israel during the early days of the Mandate when there was unemployment. Today, she said, there was much shortage in workers and there was employment for anyone seeking it. One of the participants said that since 65 % of Israelis were Sephardi Jews, they deserved at least 70 Knesset members. They railed at the words of the minister of welfare who said that large homes were being built for Russian

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<sup>61</sup> Knesset debate July 18, 1971. For transcript of her meeting with the Black Panthers, see Ha’aretz, December 7, 2007.

immigrants because they suffered so much in that country and for Western immigrants because they were used to a very high level of standard of living. Golda said she was very much aware of the social and economic gap and that her government was acting and would continue to act to eradicate it. One of the participants called her a liar. Her response was: “Who are you not to believe me and call me a liar, shame on you. You have no manners”. The accuser apologized. Toward the conclusion of the meeting, Golda told them that they had not told her anything new that she did not know, and that she was fully aware of poverty and the social gap even before the creation of the “Panthers”. She asked them not to leak the contents of the meeting to the media as she sensed that nothing good would emerge from this gathering. The meeting only served to underline the enormous alienation between Golda and representatives of the needy sectors. They felt, with some justification, that the nation’s leadership was apathetic to their fate and ignored their demands and that it could not care less if this sector would continue to be discriminated and would never achieve its aspirations to climb the social, economic and even the political ladders. Golda just could not put herself in their shoes. The meeting with the “Black Panthers” was an exercise of miscommunication. She spoke to them about what the government was doing for them in housing, education, mortgages, loans and grants. They wanted representation based on country of origin in the Knesset, the government and local authorities. She thought the process should be gradual and they must develop in the accepted state and party frameworks. They were angry and sentimental and refused to hear about institutionalized processes. They reminded her of the “street” of which she was so afraid, of incited mobs. She spoke with much nostalgia of the good old days, they retorted with description of the harsh present. As far as she was concerned, Sephardi Jews were not seen as a legitimate special interest group, such as the kibbutzim, moshavim, or labor unions fighting for better employment terms and salary raises. Her reaction to the development of this movement, which she thought initially was marginal, was slow. When she finally realized the amount of dynamite embedded in this problem, it was too late. If initially she may have thought that this was a passing phenomenon of a few hot-headed youngsters incited by the radical left, soon she changed her mind and partly under the influence of her daughter-in-law decided to establish the Prime Minister’s Commission for Children and Youth in Distress. Maybe something good would emerge from this. But until then, the disconnection was almost total.

At the end of one of her meetings with the “Panther” leaders, a journalist asked her what she thought of them. Her reply was, “they are not nice.” This expression would haunt her for the rest of her life. Many of these young Israelis whom she thought were not nice gave their votes to Menachem Begin, himself for

many years discriminated against and not nice, with whom they now identified. In retrospect, the “Black Panthers” were a genuine and legitimate protest movement whose leaders lacked political skills. However, their main achievement was to place the communal gap on the national agenda. Several years later, when they heeded Golda’s advice and decided to establish a political party and run for the Knesset, they failed miserably and disappeared from the horizon. But the issue did not and continued to bedevil Golda. In a public meeting with students at Beer Sheva University, she was asked by students of the Sephardi community about preferential treatment given to Russian and American immigrants. Her reply was terse: “Have you got anything against immigration?” She never dreamed, she added, that Israeli students would charge that new immigrants were living at their expense, and stated cynically: “All the students in Jerusalem Tel Aviv and Haifa are living at the expense of Jews who do not live in Israel.”

At this time, it also became evident how deeply the machinery of the Labor Party was disintegrating and degenerating and sinking into atrophy. Perhaps it was inevitable that a party that had started its way as an ideological movement had lost its spontaneity, had absorbed so many new sectors and layers that had no ideological interests or concerns, but turned the party into a mass movement and a supermarket of bodies, groups and ideas. Mapai had always espoused a worldview which was very flexible, dealt in generalities and was vague enough to accommodate many elements, but now it lacked a coherent ideology and was on its way to evaporation. There was need to satisfy and pacify everybody and the lowest common denominator was the one that still held the party together. In the absence of vision, the apparatus took over. If in its early and vibrant days it was led by giants such as Berl, Ben-Gurion, Remez, Beilinson, Tabenkin and others, now it was led by bureaucrats who lacked vision and inspiration. The best people were absorbed by the government, Knesset, the Jewish Agency, the Histadrut. Those who remained saw their job in the party as a source of livelihood and not a mission. The result was the prevention of confronting complex social and ideological issues. To make things worse, many of the political-bureaucratic functionaries were intellectually unable to deal with such issues. Among them was the new party secretary Israel Yesha’ayahu, who took over from Aryeh (Lova) Eliav, a man of principles and vision, who resigned from his post saying he was unable to carry out the necessary changes and he opposed the foreign policies of Golda Meir.

Now the party leadership consisted of aging personalities who had long passed their prime and their days of glory, tired from decades of struggles. This was the oligarchy that was now headed by a 73-year-old woman who claimed that a person’s age could not be judged solely by the number of years, but she probably read the writing on the wall. The oligarchy was able to insure its survival

and delayed handing over power to the younger generation by several years, but during those years it succeeded in bringing the party to new low levels. True, Golda did bring into her cabinet some relatively young ministers in their 50's, Shlomo Hillel and Chaim Bar-Lev, but most of the other ministers were in their 60's. The co-option of Bar-Lev to the cabinet after he ended his term as chief of staff created some misgivings among the party elders. Some feared that every general would now prepare his political future before shedding his uniform. Moshe Carmel argued that Bar-Lev had to undergo a certain period of preparation for his ministerial post. Golda was openly resentful at such comments. Bar-Lev's biographer quotes Golda's words at the conclusion of the discussion in the Labor Party Bureau about co-opting Bar-Lev to the cabinet: "I wish success to every prime minister, I wish him with all my heart that he will have such ministers, in uniform or without them...there could be military men or parties who will exploit their being in the army for political gains. If only for that we have to conclude that there is a flaw in a man who served in our army, in the condition of Israel. When Bar-Lev joined the Palmach, he did not think he would live like this for thirty years." Bar-Lev joined the cabinet next to another former chief of staff, Moshe Dayan, and another former general, Yigal Allon.

However, the appointment of Hillel and Bar-Lev was unable to prevent the slump into which the party sunk, which was expressed in avoiding discussions on social, political and economic issues, in determining a clear-cut plan over the preference for stability. No one spoke openly of stifling discussion and preventing freedom of speech, but the members of the party mechanism who had tangible material interests in maintaining the status quo never dared to do something the ministers did not dare—to publicly cross swords with the prime minister. This climate marked by the absence of free debate prevailed. All knew that Golda preferred not to make any decision on key ideological issues and of her aversion to the intellectuals, the "talkers" who were not "doers". She was never a woman of vision who could inspire the masses. She did not make any personal demand, did not point the way, something Ben-Gurion tried to do when he went to Sede Boker. The party apparatus made sure it would stay in power and rewarded its members with positions and influence. A vicious circle was created: conformity reigned. Those who were not ready to tow the line had to pay the price of either resigning or being moved from the center of power. Shulamit Allony learned this harsh lesson when she publicly criticized the prime minister. She was not included in the next Knesset list.

Because of their many commitments and their frequent absences from Israel, the party leaders did not have enough time and energy or even interest to devote themselves to routine party matters. Although the central bodies of the party continued to function, the branches began to disintegrate and served more as

a rubber stamp for decisions made by the aging leadership. The threat she often uttered against those who on occasion were critical was: “do you want to take over right now?” Another stock answer Golda often used to stifle criticism was: “Have you no other worries at this time”?

In her order of priorities, the party was fairly low. She had another, emotional problem in making the sharp transition from talking one day with the president of the United States, to having an endless argument with some disgruntled young party members the next, especially when they demanded to be included in the circle of decision makers. She preferred not to make radical changes in the leadership so as not to cause unnecessary personal problems. Every promotion of a Rafi politician had to be accompanied by a similar promotion of an Achdut Ha'avodah man, and that could endanger the very delicate and fragile balance and undermine the stability that had become a value by itself. Apart from discussing issues such as peace, borders, territories and Jerusalem, the party ruling bodies usually discussed secondary issues such as the attitude towards Israeli Arabs or other matters that were less controversial. There were a number of think task forces that existed in the Labor Party that included some impressive talents, but few took them seriously, least of all the prime minister. Few expected that the prime minister would come up with immediate solutions to all of Israel's problems, but the position entailed the duty of formulating long-range plans in various topics, how to achieve them and how she intended to do so. Each plan meant an argument, argument meant raising controversial issues. She thought she knew what the people wanted: peace, economic growth, equality and a well-ordered society. Her leadership was limited to finding pragmatic solutions and maintaining the consensus. True, most Israelis did not want to be bothered by ideological and similarly complicated matters. Israelis now wanted the good life, purchase home appliances, travel abroad more often. She may have understood the needs of the people. But leadership does not mean only satisfying the needs but charting a course and new direction. This she did not do. If a comparison is made of her achievements in legislating social laws when she was minister of labor and her achievements as prime minister in these spheres, as prime minister her contribution to these matters was minimal apart from uttering trite slogans. She and her team devoted most of their time to foreign affairs and security. Typically, when she was prime minister, she did not have an adviser on social and economic affairs in her inner circle. She relied on the pertinent ministries to come up with ideas and solutions.

It was already noted that on the security-political fronts, things began to cool off considerably in the fall of 1970, after the successful resolution of the problems created by the conflict between Jordan and the PLO, that became known as “Black September”. There now remained the question of what would be the

next move. The cease-fire along the Suez Canal was holding after three months, the possibility that Israel would resume the War of Attrition was no longer on the agenda. On November 7, Dayan recommended that Israel agree to the renewal of the Jarring talks. He stated that Israel must jump into the very, very cold waters at whose center there was a huge iceberg—Resolution 242.<sup>62</sup> Golda was angered because the idea had not yet been discussed in the cabinet. She did not always insist on an orderly process of decision-making. When Dayan, as was his habit, thought that a new and novel move should be discussed by the cabinet, he made sure he would first air it publicly so that it would be treated seriously by Golda and the cabinet. In the course of a visit to Washington in December 1970, he raised the idea of an interim agreement that would include the clearing and reopening of the Suez Canal by the Egyptians and parallel to that a limited Israeli troop withdrawal from the East Bank of the Canal. The withdrawal would be unilateral, without an Egyptian quid pro quo for Israel. He thought that Egypt's new president Anwar Sadat should be given an incentive in the shape of a limited Israeli withdrawal that would make Egypt clear the Canal and open it for international shipping and would also rehabilitate the Egyptian cities in the Canal Zone that were partly destroyed by Israel during the War of Attrition so that a million and a half Egyptians who had fled from them in the course of that war could return. This would also remind the Egyptians that they had failed in the War of Attrition. Dayan had hoped that the creation of a positive atmosphere would prevent the renewal of fighting and perhaps encourage the Egyptians to start a political process with Israel, either direct or indirect. Golda had already asked Kissinger about such a possibility on October 25. Kissinger replied positively to both Israeli leaders.<sup>63</sup> Years later, Eban thought that there was a missed opportunity when Golda did not allow Dayan to raise this plan officially, although Golda did suggest to Nixon that he meet Dayan and hear his new ideas. Dayan understood that he could raise the proposals not as those of the government of Israel but strictly as his private ideas.<sup>64</sup>

At this point, not much progress was made on implementing this idea because most of the attention was focused on the resumption of the Jarring talks, which was made possible after the Nixon administration resumed arms shipments to Israel and asked Congress to approve 500 million dollar credit to Israel for its purchase. Jarring's mission was also resumed because of a letter Nixon sent to Golda on December 3, 1970, in which he wrote that the current situation was ripe for the

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<sup>62</sup> Dayan, *Milestones*, p. 523.

<sup>63</sup> Gazit, *Peace Process*, p. 120.

<sup>64</sup> Beilin, *Price of Unity*, p. 118.

resumption of the talks because of the many dramatic changes that took place in the Arab world. Among them, he enumerated the death of Nasser and the victory of Hussein over both the PLO and the Syrian forces in Jordan. In his letter, Nixon once again confirmed his commitment to American arms supplies and wrote that Israel's requirements would be given the highest priority. He reminded her that half of America's military aid worldwide was given to Israel. The main thrust of the letter was his promise of July 23, 1970, on the eve of the cease-fire. He reiterated his promise that the United States would not pressure Israel to heed Egypt's demand for total Israeli withdrawal to the lines of June 5, 1967, or implement the resolution of the refugees issue on the basis of General Assembly Resolution 194 of 1948, about their right of return or resettlement elsewhere. America would never support any solution to the refugee issue that would alter the Jewish character of Israel or endanger its security. The goal must be peace treaties in which the commitments of the parties would be clearly defined and until such time there would be no withdrawal of a single Israeli soldier from the occupied territories. The final borders must be agreed between the parties through negotiations under the auspices of Jarring. He agreed that there were differences of opinion between Israel and the United States on the nature of the final settlement, but the relations between the two nations were such that differences of opinions were possible. He repeated his position that the United States viewed Israel's security and existence as top priority.

All this enabled the government of Israel to announce the resumption of the talks on December 29. Jarring was invited to come to Jerusalem for talks with the prime minister, and barely agreed to come for two days only. He preferred to conduct low-level negotiations in New York. During a meeting with Golda Meir, she stressed that negotiations must be direct and not through others and handed him a document that detailed Israel's peace principles. Contrary to the understanding that all remain secret, this document was leaked to a newspaper in Paris, causing the Egyptians to reject it out of hand.

Now the time element began to play a role in the considerations of the relevant parties. In November 1970, Sadat extended the cease-fire for an additional three months period, until February 7, 1971. Israel and the United States did not yet have a chance to wonder about the character and policies of the new Egyptian president. When he succeeded Nasser, Golda sent him a message through a European government, but he ignored it. It was assumed in Jerusalem that he needed some time to entrench himself in power and until then no radical moves could be undertaken. Soon a feeling of distrust was expressed in Israel because of Sadat's many extremist declarations against the Jewish state that also included some anti-Semitic motives. Israel did not trust Jarring either, especially after he handed over an Israeli message to the Egyptian government from which he crossed out



the word “Aide Memoir” because he thought that Egypt would refuse to accept it if so worded. Before long Jarring felt there was no progress and then undertook a radical move. On February 8, he sent identical notes to Egypt and Israel demanding they simultaneously detail their commitments to each other.<sup>65</sup> Israel would give prior commitments to withdraw from all of Sinai to the Mandatory borders that existed between Israel and Egypt, with the understanding that certain satisfactory arrangements would be made for the creation of demilitarized zones, and certain appropriate security arrangements in Sharm el-Sheikh in order to insure freedom of navigation in the Straits of Tiran and freedom of navigation in the Suez Canal. Egypt would give a commitment to enter into a peace agreement with Israel that would include the end of state of war, respect for and recognition of the independence of the two nations and their right to live in peaceful, secure and agreed borders, to prevent hostile acts and refrain from interfering in the domestic affairs of each one of them.

Egypt’s reply was handed to Jarring on February 15, 1971, and included the demand for a prior Israeli commitment to fully implement Resolution 242 that for them meant total withdrawal of Israel from all of Sinai and the Gaza Strip, a just solution of the refugee problems in accordance with UN resolutions, terminating all claims of belligerency, respect for the sovereignty, territorial integrity and independence of each one of them, prevention of hostile acts from their territory, and noninterference in domestic affairs. Israel would also give an undertaking to agree to the establishment of demilitarized zone with equal size on both sides of the borders, and the establishment of a United Nations force consisting of the forces of the four permanent members of the Security Council. Only after Israel gave these commitments, would Egypt be prepared to enter into a peace agreement with Israel that would include all these commitments as written in Resolution 242. Egypt was also prepared to give a commitment regarding freedom of navigation in the Suez Canal based on the 1888 Constantinople Convention and freedom of navigation in the Straits of Tiran based on international law and the stationing of United Nations forces there. The last two items were therefore not absolute but conditional.

Jarring’s move angered the government of Israel. It had not anticipated such radical step that it claimed exceeded his brief. Jarring explained that he had to do something radical so as not to give the Egyptians an excuse to resume shooting on February 7, 1971. He conveniently ignored the fact that on February 4, Sadat once again extended the cease-fire by another month. Clarifications provided by Jarring as to the meaning of freedom of navigation that included the stationing

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<sup>65</sup> See United Nations Secretary General Report in Medzini, Documents, pp. 935–954.

of UN forces, as well as his explanation that the future of the Gaza Strip would be determined in future negotiations, were deemed insufficient by Israel. Jarring's demands now embarrassed the government of Israel. He totally ignored its declarations that it would under no circumstances ever withdraw to the 1967 lines, he also failed to take into account the principle of sovereignty in return of security and once again wanted to restore the presence of the UN forces in the Gaza Strip that effectively meant returning the Strip to Egypt. The Egyptian reply said nothing about direct negotiations between the parties, nothing on normalization of relations and what sort of ties would exist in the future between Israel and Egypt. Egypt also stated that her demands were to be accepted as a package, non-negotiable deal with no need for further talks.

On the face of it, for the first time Egypt gave a positive reply to Jarring and mentioned clearly her desire to enter into a peace agreement with Israel, but there were many conditions attached. One of them was the additional Egyptian demand that the basis for peace was the full implementation of Resolution 242 that meant total Israeli withdrawal in all sectors back to the 1967 lines.<sup>66</sup> This meant also the West Bank, East Jerusalem and the Golan Heights. Jarring viewed the Egyptian reply as a positive development. The Egyptian readiness that mentioned the possibility of peace agreement with Israel in an official Egyptian note, was seen worldwide as a serious change of attitude. Few paid attention to the many conditions attached. On the contrary, when Israel spoke of its willingness to enter into a peace agreement with Egypt, it was met with criticism and doubts that it was not really interested in full peace with Egypt, and that Israel was the one who rejected the hand that Egypt had extended. Few noticed that several days after the reply to Jarring, Sadat granted an interview to "Newsweek" in which he spoke in English of a peace treaty, while in the Arabic translation of the interview issued by the official Middle East News Agency he spoke of "peace terms" and did not mention those parts about Israel's sovereignty and free passage for its goods in the Suez Canal.<sup>67</sup> Sadat's reply to Jarring had virtually no echo in Egypt and was barely mentioned in the memoirs of its Foreign Minister Mahmoud Riad. The Nixon administration too was not overly excited because it was afraid that Israel and Egypt might reach a bilateral agreement instead of a comprehensive one, something they both did in 1978. The United States did not follow this Egyptian move by calling on Egypt to enter into direct talks with Israel.

Once Jarring had received answers to his questionnaire, his mission effectively lapsed. In the eyes of Israel, he was seen as one who identified with Egypt's

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<sup>66</sup> Medzini, Documents, p. 952.

<sup>67</sup> Gazit, Peace Process, pp. 86–87; Newsweek, 22 February 1971.

position. Because of the storm that erupted due to his Aide Memoire, little attention was focused on Sadat's speech of February 4, 1971, in which he announced the extension of the cease-fire by another month and also mentioned a new Egyptian initiative of an interim and partial withdrawal of Israeli troops from the East Bank of the Suez Canal as a first step in a timetable to be determined with the goal of implementing the other parts of Security Council Resolution 242. He stated that if this happened in the coming month, Egypt would be prepared at once to start clearing the Suez Canal and reopen it to international shipping that would be beneficial for the world's economy.<sup>68</sup> Israel's response was not well-thought-out. In an interview on ABC Television, Golda said there was nothing new in Sadat's offer and that Israel was ready in principle to accept the idea in return for freedom of navigation in the Suez Canal. In fact, this was an echo of the December 1970 Dayan idea. Two days later, she backtracked somewhat and said in the Knesset that the IDF would not withdraw from the existing cease-fire lines without a comprehensive peace. She added that Sadat's speech was not a declaration of peace. "Throughout his entire speech, the Egyptian president refrained from saying that Egypt was ready to make peace with Israel, clear and simple: peace between Egypt and Israel".<sup>69</sup>

Israel's official reply to the Egyptian reply to the Jarring memorandum was handed to him by Eban and later expressed in a Knesset statement by the prime minister on March 16, 1971. She repeated the principle that peace was possible only through direct negotiations between the parties without prior conditions. Israel was ready to withdraw but to secure borders, and in any case it would never go back to the 1967 lines. She claimed that the Egyptians were basically asking to dictate the outcome of the negotiations before they even started, and to this Israel would never agree. It would be ready to accept demilitarized zones where joint Israel-Egyptian forces would patrol instead of a United Nations force whose nonexistent effectiveness was demonstrated on the eve of the Six Days War.

As expected, Sadat's statement regarding the interim arrangement proposal and the Egyptian reply to Jarring unleashed a storm of protests in Israel. Many Israelis who yearned for any sign of peace on the part of the Arabs were unhappy with their government's reply. Part of the problem was the poor public relations of the Meir government, under the responsibility of Galili, who was also her main speech writer and political adviser. Instead of criticizing the Egyptian note, Israel should have announced that it had heard the Egyptians intentions

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<sup>68</sup> Statement in the National Assembly of Egypt, 4 February 1971, quoted by Gazit, *Peace Process*, p. 81.

<sup>69</sup> Statement in the Knesset, 9 February 1971.

to enter into a peace agreement with a great deal of interest and wanted to enter into negotiations, direct or even indirect, to reach such a peace agreement. It would have been favorably accepted both at home and abroad and would not have been seen as a commitment to withdraw. Almost fifty years later, there are still many in Israel who are convinced that the Meir government erred seriously by rejecting the Egyptian offer outright. Those who criticized Golda ignored Max Weber's saying that it is impossible to understand history in retrospect and certainly it was impossible to judge those who shape it by different values than those that guided them. Many of her critics judged her harshly in retrospect after the Sadat visit to Jerusalem and the signing of the Egypt-Israel peace treaty in March 1979. They ignored the fact that the agreement was signed after a bloody war that finally brought the IDF to a distance of 101 kilometers from Cairo, after a series of interim agreements between 1973 and 1975, a very intensive American mediation, full Israeli withdrawal from Sinai (and not from Gaza), evacuation of settlements, Begin's recognition of the rights of the Palestinian people and their just requirements, direct negotiations between the parties and unconditional freedom of navigation in the Suez Canal and the Straits of Tiran, and above all full normalization of relations. Few critics ever bothered to read the series of Egyptian conditions detailed in their reply to the Jarring document, for if they had, they would have realized that no Israeli government then and since would have been willing to accept them—total withdrawal, the division of Jerusalem, resolving the refugee issue based on UN resolutions. Those who defended the governments' position, including Abba Eban, Simcha Dinitz and Mordechai Gazit, explained that there were serious doubts if Sadat really meant a full-fledged peace treaty including full normalization in relations, open borders, embassies and economic ties. The Egyptian foreign minister also thought that Sadat meant something very limited. So did the Nixon administration. Even Mapam, a party that supported large-scale concessions for peace, supported Golda's policy. Its leader Yaacov Hazan said in Mapam Secretariat: "I am full of admiration for Golda's stubborn intelligence. We can negotiate but not return to the 1967 lines. Egypt surely must know this". A number of historians saw her policy as a monumental missed opportunity, thus making the Yom Kippur War a distinct possibility if not inevitable. They ignore the fact that Sadat never abandoned the military option and continued his daily preparations for the crossing of the Suez Canal by the Egyptian army. Maybe these moves were a part of his campaign of deceit in order to blacken Israel's image and justify the resumption of the war against Israel. In historic retrospect, it is hard to attribute to Golda the full responsibility for the Yom Kippur War, although she headed the government that was not fully prepared when that war erupted. That war was probably inevitable unless Israel had accepted in full the Egyptian dictates and withdrawn to the 1967 lines with no negotiations and no

peace treaty. At best maybe that would have brought about an end of the state of belligerency.

It must also be recalled that Golda lacked any trust in the leaders of Egypt, especially in view of the cease-fire violations and the Egyptian military buildup along the Canal in the days before the Yom Kippur War. The slow American reaction to these violations did not bolster her trust in the American leaders either. For its part, the United States did not yet think in terms of providing Israel with assurances and guarantees if it entered into peace negotiations with Egypt. Only after the Yom Kippur War, Israel demanded and received detailed documents enumerating in clear language the American commitments in case of Egyptian violations. Seen from the perspective of early 1971, the Egyptian reply to the Jarring Aide Memoire it was clear that on most key issues there had been no change in the position of Egypt as it existed before June 1967, mostly on the issue of freedom of navigation, demilitarized zones and UN forces. Direct talks with Israel were taboo. The Egyptian ambassador to the United Nations persistently refused to accept through Jarring any note from Israel, saying that Egypt was not negotiating with Israel but only with Jarring.

Because the Jarring initiative was frozen, the idea of an interim agreement on the Suez Canal loomed as the best next step. Sadat repeated his readiness to do so in his contacts with the Americans. Some in Israel toyed with the idea that because of the Vietnam War there would be little enthusiasm in America to reopen the Suez Canal, because it would give a strategic advantage to the Soviets and make it easier for them to supply North Vietnam through the Canal. Nixon however had no objection to the idea, but he agreed with Israel that an interim withdrawal must not be linked to the principle of total withdrawal. Golda went even further and expressed outright opposition to withdrawal from secure borders even in return for peace. Speaking at the Labor Party Central Committee on March 17, 1971, she stated that the Israelis were a people with long experience:

What is the situation as I see it? I think the cabinet did well when it noted with satisfaction Sadat's saying that he is willing to enter into peace negotiations with us. It does not mean that we should forget what he said yesterday and the next day, and not take seriously what he added to this statement, and what Hassaneen Haikal told the Palestinians and what he writes weekly and explains what are Sadat's peace talks. I do not have to say thank you. There is nothing in it. But I must be careful not to be mesmerized by the word peace, perhaps because we so much yearn for peace, without seeing what goes around that word.

We are experienced. We cannot even trust a peace treaty when it will be written and signed. Maybe in another generation. I do not know if things will be good. Pity I will not be around. But I am realistic. I know I shall not be. A Russian immigrant said to me with excitement: The Land of Israel should live forever. But since we have experience and we are not that stupid not to learn from that experience, we cannot depend even on a written agreement.

From there—borders. I know the doctrine that our good friends are trying to teach us is nonsense. What are borders? They are nothing. We need guarantees and that's it. But I have not yet seen the United States or any other country that is prepared to tell its good neighbors—with whom she is not in a state of war—lets say Canada, let's cancel the border between us, you take what you want and we shall take what we want. There are no borders between us. The days of Messiah. Only we, Israel, must be the guinea pig of borders that are not important.<sup>70</sup>

Golda repeated her position regarding the interim agreement in a speech at the Labor Party Convention of April 4, 1971, when she stressed that if the Egyptians insisted that the interim agreement be the first stage of total withdrawal, and only then would Egypt agree to extend the cease-fire for a definite period after which Jarring could determine a timetable for withdrawal from all the territories, and an Egyptian army would cross the Canal and assume responsibility for the East Bank—if that was Sadat's proposal, it could not be a basis for an agreement with Israel. She saw the Egyptian plan as a move aimed at mobilizing pressure on Israel to accept the opening of the Canal in the framework of an imposed Egyptian-Soviet political-military arrangement. She had good reason for that. Several months earlier, in a "Ha'aretz" interview, she admitted that the "possibility of direct Soviet intervention in response to the bombing deep inside Egypt had not been taken into account when this military move was discussed". At the conclusion of her statement to the Convention, she said: "We have a cease-fire. For our part, let it continue. But if it will not—have no fear. There is absolute security. I would very much like to tell Sadat and his friends in Egypt and the rest of the Arab states, if it were possible, it is not worth it, really it is not worth it for you. And we say so because we see the IDF, the human material, the equipment, the efficiency, the talents, the ability and the devotion."<sup>71</sup>

Even before that, on March 12, 1971, she gave an interview to the "Times" of London in which she detailed Israel's territorial demands. She repeated these ideas on March 16 in reply to a non-confidence motion in the Knesset presented by the opposition: she thought that the security border between Israel and Jordan should be the River Jordan, Israel would give up parts of the West Bank, Gaza would not be returned to Egypt, Sharm el-Sheikh would remain in Israel's hands and there must be territorial contiguity between Sharm and Eilat; Sinai would be demilitarized, United Jerusalem would remain under Israeli sovereignty as would the Golan Heights, there would be no Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza. She rejected international guarantees and called for secure and agreed

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<sup>70</sup> Labor Party Central Committee, 17 March 1971.

<sup>71</sup> Labor Party Conference, 4 April 1971.

borders to be determined through negotiations.<sup>72</sup> Both the interview and the Knesset statement caused much disappointment and frustration in Washington. The Americans were still determined to preserve their standing as an objective mediator, although both sides doubted it. Israel was not successful in allaying the fears of the administration when it handed it a memorandum agreeing to a minor withdrawal of the IDF from the water's edge, as long as it would not be considered as the first stage of a comprehensive withdrawal. Israel asked that the war would not be resumed and that Egypt would clear the Canal and allow Israeli ships to sail in that water way. The agreement must stand on its own and not be linked to a comprehensive agreement or dependent on the Jarring talks. Israel also asked that no armed Egyptian forces would cross the Canal. As expected, Egypt rejected the Israeli plan. This stalemate was the background for the visit to the Middle East of Secretary of State William Rogers in early May 1971.

Golda had no special sympathy for Rogers. The talks with him that started on May 6, were held in a tense atmosphere. He wanted to discuss a comprehensive settlement while she wanted to talk about an interim agreement. She claimed that Rogers and his people displayed little concern to Israel's interests and was deeply insulted when he praised Sadat as a moderate and flexible leader. The discussion turned shrill and rose to high tones when Rogers and she exchanged "high level" spiteful words as described by Dayan.<sup>73</sup> To rescue the talks from total collapse, it was decided that Dayan would meet with Sisco the next day in an attempt to work out proposals for an interim arrangement.

In the meeting with Sisco, with Dinitz present as Golda's representative and without Rabin at Dayan's specific request, various ideas were raised about the depth of the IDF withdrawal from the Canal. One idea spoke of ten kilometers and the possibility of stationing Egyptian civilians on the East Bank of the Canal. Another was a more significant withdrawal of up to 35 kilometers all the way to the Mitla and Gidi passes in return for an Egyptian agreement to end the state of belligerency. The United States did pass these ideas to Sadat, but he held up his reply, thus frustrating the American mediation process.<sup>74</sup> One idea presented to Sadat was in the form of a document written by the American representative in Cairo Donald Bergus that proposed an agreement including movement of Egyptian military forces to the East Bank and linking the interim arrangement to a comprehensive settlement. This was contrary to what had been discussed with Sisco. The document was leaked and angered Jerusalem. Israel doubted the sincerity of America's capacity as a mediator, especially when a delay in supply-

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<sup>72</sup> Interview in the Times of London, 12 March 1971; Statement in the Knesset, 16 March 1971.

<sup>73</sup> Saadia Touval, *The Peace Brokers—Mediators in the Arab-Israel Conflict*, Princeton, 1982, p. 186.

<sup>74</sup> Dayan, *Milestones*.

ing Israel with additional fighter jets was at stake. In Egypt itself, a number of important events also took place. In May 1971, Sadat purged some of his more pro-Soviet leaders, but shortly after that he signed a five-year defense treaty with the Soviet Union. Israel was alarmed. Once again, the military balance of forces was bound to tilt against it. Washington was also alarmed. Concessions to Egypt at the expense of Israel would be interpreted as yielding to a Soviet client and pressuring a friend. What would America's many friends in the world, chief among them South Vietnam, say?

On October 4, 1971, Secretary Rogers addressed the United Nations General Assembly and detailed the American position on the interim arrangement. He stated that the separate agreement was only a step in the direction of the full implementation of Resolution 242. The cease-fire would be long and an agreement would determine the principle of withdrawal as part of a comprehensive agreement. He added that the parties would have to find a solution for the presence of Egyptian forces on the East Bank, the use of the Canal and various supervisory arrangements. At the end of his statement he called for "proximity talks" through the United States.<sup>75</sup> Two days later, Golda responded in the Knesset. Regrettably, she said, Rogers's speech did not contribute to the advancement of a special arrangement for the reopening of the Canal. It would only spur the Egyptians to stick to their stubborn positions. Israel's acceptance of the interim agreement was based on the principle that Egypt would not transfer military forces across the Canal. The agreement, she said, must stand on its own and not be part of a comprehensive settlement which meant total withdrawal.<sup>76</sup> She repeated her position in a tough statement to the Knesset on October 26. As it seemed that the relations between Jerusalem and Washington were on a collision course, Rabin initiated a non-conventional diplomatic move: in a private conversation with Kissinger, he proposed that Golda would be invited for a working visit to Washington when the entire matter would be discussed in detail. On his own, he suggested that if the United States rescinded the Rogers Plan, Israel would give up one of its two demands: either the unlimited cease-fire or the end of the state of belligerency. He spoke of a withdrawal depth of 30 kilometers, leaving the passes in Israeli hands. Golda rebuked the ambassador. The ideas he mentioned were unacceptable to her and she deeply regretted that he had even raised them. Golda instructed him to inform Kissinger that they were null and void. Israel also rejected a two-phased Soviet proposal—a partial settlement in 1972 and a comprehensive one in 1973 (to enable Nixon to win the 1972 presidential elections). Even Washington rejected this idea.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Statement in the United Nations General Assembly; see Medzini, Documents, pp. 975–977.

<sup>76</sup> Statement in the Knesset, 6 October 1971, in Medzini, Documents, pp. 977–979.

<sup>77</sup> Rabin, Service Book, pp. 255–254.



In the midst of these unpleasant events, she found time to attend Ben-Gurion's eighty-fifth birthday celebrations. The Labor Party finally rose above the memories of the past and held a major event on the grounds of its ideological center, the Berl Katznelson College near Tel Aviv. Seated next to Ben-Gurion and Shazar in between Golda rose to the occasion:

Anyone who has to say something to Ben-Gurion over the next few weeks will probably be embarrassed just like me... He taught me not to make decisions just by taking the easy, no-risk road. He taught us all, and especially me, to live without illusions, and not to make decisions based on illusions. The necessary courage requires us to see the difficulties, and if something is necessary, do it despite the difficulties. If something is grave and dangerous, but it is still the only way—this is the way we must follow.

Golda's next visit to the United States began on December 1, 1971, and lasted two weeks. In her talk with the president a day after her arrival, they agreed on the supply of the airplanes. Golda said that Israel wanted a political settlement but with its knowledge and not one that would be imposed on it. It was in fact determined that the Rogers Plan was effectively dead although not yet buried, there would be no American-Soviet deal at Israel's expense and the arms shipments would continue. Kissinger would now assume greater and expanded responsibility for Middle Eastern affairs, now that his reputation soared as a result of the secret trip that he had made to Beijing in July that opened the way for the restoration of Sino-American ties. In a conversation with him on December 10, Golda made significant concessions in Israel's position. She agreed to a limited 18–24 months' cease-fire. In return for the removal of the Rogers Plan from the agenda, she agreed that there could be a linkage between the interim settlement (also known as the Partial Settlement) and a comprehensive one. The withdrawal would be 30 kilometers deep and a small number of Egyptian soldiers would be allowed to cross the Canal.<sup>78</sup> Procedures for proximity talks would be determined. The United States would seek to obtain Soviet agreement to these arrangements and both would try to convince Egypt of their usefulness. The attempts to seek Soviet agreement lingered on and in effect were put on hold until the outbreak of the Yom Kippur war. In March 1972, Sadat announced that as far as he was concerned, the talks were a "dead horse". There were additional contacts, but in Israel, the impression was created that there was no need to act rashly because the cease-fire was holding as were the American arms shipments.

With America's encouragement, direct contacts were maintained throughout those years between Israel and Jordan. Golda had come to like the Jordanian

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<sup>78</sup> On the talks in Washington see Rabin, *Service Book*; Gazit, *Peace Process*, pp. 366–367; for the transcript see US National Archives, College Park, MD.

monarch who she had first met in Paris in 1965. The talks were held in the Arava near Eilat, on a boat anchored off Aqaba and in an official Israeli government guest house near Tel Aviv where he flew by helicopter, usually piloting himself. The subjects ranged over the future of the territories, and various Israel-Jordan agreements on water and security issues. Golda was not the only Israeli leader to meet the king, so did Eban, Dayan, Allon and Chief of Staff Bar-Lev on various occasions. Israel's ideas concerned the establishment of a Jordanian civil administration in the West Bank and granting Jordan a standing in Gaza, focusing on the use of an expanded port of Gaza by Jordan. In return, Jordan would grant some Gazans Jordanian passports. Jordan would appoint the head of the Supreme Moslem Council in Jerusalem and would have a certain standing in that city that would remain united under Israel. Israel and Jordan would also cooperate in joint development projects such as laying a railway line from the Dead Sea south to Eilat that would also serve Aqaba. Israel asked Jordan to agree to the construction of large IDF bases in the West Bank to protect existing settlements and new ones to be built on public land. Jordan committed itself to do all it could to prevent the movement of terrorists from the East Bank. Golda supported a territorial arrangement based on the Allon Plan, but was ready to accept, as a first step, the principle of "functional cooperation" conceived by Dayan that meant in effect the involvement of Jordan in administering the territories while security would remain the responsibility of Israel. The king however demanded an interim arrangement that would include an Israeli withdrawal from the Jordan Valley. He even insisted on this during his last meeting with Golda in March 1974 after the Yom Kippur War. He constantly stated that he could not accept a peace treaty without total Israeli withdrawal from the territories. Israel's leaders had no illusion about the king's ability to sign a peace agreement let alone implement it. Their main aim was to insure quiet along Israel's eastern borders, to show America that they were flexible when it came to Jordan and to advance the Open Bridges Policy that was dependent on the king's will, thus pacifying the West Bank. Hussein may have already given up any hope of regaining the West Bank, he wanted peace and quiet along his western borders with Israel, and he also met the Israeli leaders because he wanted to retain America's support and avoid Israeli retaliation actions. He also asked that Israel persuade the local Palestinian leaders in the West Bank to preserve their Jordanian orientation. There was some "Oriental Romanticism" atmosphere in some of these meetings held in tents in the desert in the middle of the night under conditions of strict secrecy, never to be openly admitted. No concrete agreements were ever signed, but many oral arrangements were entered into that included Jordanian responsibility to prevent hostile elements from coming near the River Jordan, calm in the West Bank, and Jordanian permission to Israeli Arabs to cross through its territory on their way to

Mecca for the annual pilgrimage. There were very important agreements on the quantity of water that each side would pump from the river, in addition to flood and pest control, Jordan would administer high school examinations in the West Bank schools and there would be third-party tourism. These unwritten agreements were very important. Their value was seen when Hussein refused to join Syria and Egypt in attacking Israel on Yom Kippur 1973.<sup>79</sup>

It is likely that the contacts with Hussein may have influenced Golda's thinking on the Palestinian issue. The Palestinians were seen by her as the enemies of both Israel and the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. Perhaps she was still under the impression of her first talk with King Abdullah in November 1947, and even though the Mufti of Jerusalem had long ago disappeared from the arena, his shadow continued to haunt it. If she was negotiating with the Jordanians, how could she accept a new entity—a Palestinian one? In early 1969, she had already said that “a Palestinian entity means a Palestinian state... this has never been so. There has never been a Palestinian people”. A year later, she argued that “since 1948 no one heard of a Palestinian entity, where were they then”? Between 1921 and 1948, she had a British Passport—Palestine, issued by the Mandatory regime, therefore only those who held such passports were the real Palestinians. For her there had never been a Palestinian national identity, in the past some of them even spoke of “Greater Syria”, never of Palestine.<sup>80</sup> In a series of interviews and speeches, she denied the existence of a Palestinian national identity even when reality proved to be totally different. In the spring of 1970, she began to change her mind. In a discussion held in the General Staff on the future of the territories, she said: “I do not think that there should be a discussion on the existence of the Palestinian people. If they decide that they are a people, let them be a people. If they decide they want a state, let them have a state”. To her the most logical solution would be to establish a Palestinian state east of the Jordan River that would be the natural border between that state and Israel. As for the concept of agreed borders, she wanted such borders where there would not be a natural advantage to the Arabs. Even if there was peace, she argued, most of the wars occurred between nations that had peace treaties with their neighbors. Here she surprised the generals by saying: “we do not want to negotiate with Arafat, as long as he heads a terror organization that wishes to murder us. But if he is elected as representative of Jordan and is willing to negotiate peace, I imagine we shall sit with him”. She was followed by General Ariel Sharon, who in the mid 1970's supported

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<sup>79</sup> On the secret contacts with Hussein, see Melman, *Hostile Partnership*, pp. 82–87; Zak, *Hussein Makes Peace*.

<sup>80</sup> In the Labor Party Secretariat, 30 January 1969; see also interview in Ha'aretz, 10 February 1970.

the establishment of a Palestinian state on Jordanian territory headed by Arafat and negotiating with him. At the end of his life, this time as prime minister, Sharon accepted the idea of two states for the two nations and the establishment of a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza alongside Israel. To the end of her life, Golda opposed the establishment of an independent Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza, but she thought, if there was a peace treaty with Jordan, the Palestinians could then choose between obtaining Jordanian citizenship or between creating their own autonomous political structure in Judea and Samaria.

In March 1972, Hussein announced a new initiative whereby the Jordanian Kingdom would contain two parts, the eastern and the western. The western part would include the West Bank and Gaza. Amman would be the capital of the eastern part and Jerusalem that of the western part. He did not mention peace with Israel and spoke merely of the liberation of the lands.<sup>81</sup> Golda reacted the next day in the Knesset:

We have never interfered in the internal structure or the type of regime of any state. If the Jordanian monarch saw fit to change the name of his kingdom and call it Palestine, or any other name, and make changes in the internal structure of his kingdom to give an expression to those who call themselves Palestinians, if after negotiations between us we would reach an agreement on all questions, including the territorial one, it would be none of our business to take a stand on internal matters that are under the authority of that Arab country that borders with Israel on the east.<sup>82</sup>

Her last statement on the Palestinian issue was made in April 1973 under the pressure of Gazit, who feared that she was getting the image of one who denied the rights of Palestinians to their own identity and their own statehood. This time, she made a slight change:

When someone among us says, there are 2,5 million people wandering without a homeland, which is said about the Palestinians, it's not true, simply not true. The Jewish people have a tiny corner in this huge area, and how many independent Arab states are there? Eighteen, eighteen independent Arab states. There is talk of an Arab nation. I know there is a difference, they are not all the same. But I ask, really, is the difference between an Arab who was in Acre or Ramle or Haifa and an Arab who resides in Amman bigger than that among the tribes of Israel who are coming back to their homeland, they are really stranger to each other. Apart from the fact of being Jews, there is hardly anything common to them, no language, no cultural habits, no life in one neighborhood, in one area. The tribes of Israel come from all corners of the world, from different climates, and in much agony we merged into one Jewish people. Maybe it's a big fault that I cannot see the balance—when good Jews say there is a Jewish people and there is a Palestinian people. The Jewish people

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**81** Hussein's speech in Medzini, Documents, pp. 988–993.

**82** Statement in the Knesset, 16 March 1972.

returned to their homeland and the Palestinian people wander around the world, with no homeland. This is not true. I can definitely understand that some people connect to a place not only in an abstract way. I can see how people connect to the city where they live. I can understand that for an Arab living in Jaffa, Jaffa is dear to him. I well understood the people from Ikrit and Biram, villages dear to them, and they were not dispersed around the world, only few kilometers. I can see that. But I certainly cannot see this as something that can balance the tragedy of the Jewish people. If—God forbid!—there was no solution for them, it would be bitter not only to them, but to us as well. Luckily, this is not so. I do not think that we, the Israelis, have the right, the right to presume, to determine whether there is or is not a Palestinian entity. Let them decide. They themselves must decide this. As a result of the war imposed on us in 1948, part of the Palestinian Arabs left... However, as I said before, I reject the assertion that 2,5 million homeless Palestinian Arabs are wandering around the world. By the way, this was also said in the Knesset. There is gross distortion in comparing the state of homeless Jews with that of the Palestinian Arabs. The Palestinians live among their brethren of the same mind, same culture, same language. The Arabs themselves proclaim their being one Arab nation, even if it extends to 18 independent states. Whoever talks about a balance and an analogy between the Jewish question on the one hand and the Palestinian question on the other ignores the fact that this part of the land where we established the State of Israel, it's the only one where the Jewish people can be sovereign, where each Jew can live along his people in Jewish independence. And the Arabs, they have 18 states. An Israeli who hears this equation and is convinced by it, only a tiny step separates him from recognizing the term "stolen land" and everything that term implies...

Against this, the Jordanian government granted Jordanian citizenship to Arabs of Palestinian origin in the entire area under its authority. They gave Jordanian citizenship to residents of Judea and Samaria and to their brethren in the East Bank. All of them are citizens of Jordan. And I know, comrades, that in Jordan there are Bedouins and Palestinians and there is a sea of difference that separates them, but a sea that no one has to sink in. The Palestinian Arabs have every possibility to attain their national expression in Jordan. They need Jordan because Jordan cannot exist without them. Jordan cannot exist and develop only with its Bedouin population. Jordan has vast spaces for development, no less than what we found in this land when we came, where the Palestinians could be rehabilitated. In the East Bank reside 600,000, perhaps even more, citizens of Palestinian origin. For many years, no less than half of the members of the Jordanian parliament in Amman were Palestinians. In the present cabinet, more than half of its members are of Palestinian origin. Between the Mediterranean Sea and the Eastern desert, there is room for two states, for two states only, and not for a third one between us and Jordan. Two states: a Jewish state and an Arab state—Israel and Jordan. 600,000 and perhaps more Arabs of Palestinian origin live in the East Bank. They have origin and family ties with the Arabs of Judea and Samaria. I am so happy that the policy of the Open Bridges that enables contacts between the Arabs in the territories and their brethren in Jordan is maintained. You know that hundreds of thousands visited Israel and come and go through these bridges, and from the territories they transit to Jordan.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> In the Labor Party Secretariat, 14 April 1973.

Why did Golda acquire the image of being rigid and inflexible? The first reason had to do with the fact that the Arabs refused to negotiate directly and openly with Israel, which meant that they were not prepared to come to terms with the existence of the Jewish state, therefore as far as they were concerned, there was no significance if the withdrawal would be 10 or 30 kilometers deep. This was not what mattered to them. They adamantly refused to accept the fact that there was an independent and sovereign Jewish state in the Middle East and they had to deal with it as an equal. Israel took the statements of the Arab leaders literally and was not convinced by the American argument that Sadat's speeches were mainly for domestic needs to entrench his regime. Golda was convinced that he truly believed every word he said. By adding anti-Semitic overtones, this only served to bolster her assertion that he ought to be compared to Hitler. She knew that in 1942, Sadat had been a great admirer of Hitler, and this, in her mind, was part of his desire to annihilate the Holocaust survivors, namely to complete the job Hitler started.

Another factor was the existence of Palestinian terror. It was clear to her that this terror would continue even if Israel were to make far-reaching concessions to Egypt and Jordan, and perhaps even to Syria. The roots of terror were not the existence of an Israeli occupation, but the very existence of Israel. She thought that the terror organizations were trying to subvert Arab regimes or to force them to embark on war against Israel. Their criminal acts in Israel, in the territories and abroad only strengthened her feeling that Israel must never exhibit any signs of weakness. The destruction of a Swissair passenger plane over Switzerland on its way to Tel Aviv, the murder of innocent passengers at Lod International Airport by Japanese terrorists who trained in a PLO camp in Lebanon, and the murder of the Israeli athletic team at the Olympic Games in Munich in September 1972, only convinced her that Israel must eradicate this terror. But there were a number of setbacks in this fight. Munich, Lillehammer and the massacre at Lod, all demonstrated that Israel could not hermetically protect every Jewish or Israeli target. The attack in Munich in particular left a terrible impression on her. The Israeli athletes were kidnapped in the early hours of September 5, 1972. During that day, negotiations were held between the Arab kidnappers and the German authorities. The head of the Mossad, Zvi Zamir, was sent to Munich to liaise with the Germans. The Germans apparently relied too much on their snipers. While there was a mood of joy in the office of the prime minister when they heard that the athletes were rescued, it soon became apparent that the German forces suffered a terrible setback and 12 Israeli athletes were killed. A commission of inquiry found many faults in the arrangements made to protect the athletes. Golda, being in charge of the General Security Services, felt that some of the responsibility rested with her. In the mass funeral held for the athletes, Golda was absent. She attended another

funeral, that of her older sister Sheina who died after years of suffering. Among those who sent a condolence message was King Hussein.

The pressures on Golda were varied and emanated from many quarters. She never fully trusted the United States to fulfill all its commitments to Israel. The constant acts of terror proved to her that the Palestinian organizations were a bunch of murderers with whom Israel must never negotiate. At home, she had to lift the sagging national morale that was damaged after each Palestinian terror success. Together with her adviser on the war against terror, General Aharon Yariv, and with the head of the Mossad, she approved a number of Israeli counter-terror acts designed to eliminate those who had planned the operations against the Israeli athletes in Munich, to kill the heads of the Palestinian terror organizations and by doing so also raise the low Israeli morale. In an operation codenamed “Spring of Youth”, an elite IDF commando unit carried out a highly impressive and imaginative operation in the heart of Beirut and killed a number of Palestinian terrorist leaders. The operation was commanded by Ehud Barak, future chief of staff and future prime minister of Israel. The operation, executed in April 1973, temporarily lifted morale in Israel. When it came to anti-terror warfare, Golda had to make decisions in a sphere that was far from her expertise and with few people to consult with. She relied heavily on the head of the Mossad Zvi Zamir, and in fact authorized many of his requests, saying: “Zvika is a wonderful man and easy to work with as long as you do what he wants”.<sup>84</sup>

Sadat’s unexpected decision to remove most of the Soviet experts and technicians from Egypt in July 1972 only strengthened the feeling Golda and many others in Israel had that for the time being Egypt was not headed to war since its military option was curtailed as a result of this move. Her views on peace and security were expressed in an interview to the Israeli daily “Ma’ariv” on the eve of the Jewish New Year in late August 1972: She wanted Israel to remain on the Golan Heights, not necessarily along the existing cease-fire lines. As for Judea and Samaria, she supported the Allon Plan, borders that would be more secure and contain fewer Arabs. She wanted to retain a land link from Eilat to Sharm el-Sheikh, as for the rest of Sinai, with no strategic positions and secure borders, it simply would not work. She was highly critical over the haste with which some “good Israelis” were rushing to achieve progress on the political front. From her point of view this meant major territorial concessions. In that interview she added: “If I were an American, I would let Sadat stew a bit in his own juice, let him sit and do his own soul searching, and then, after he concluded his thinking, and decide that he really wants to end the wars, then will sit around the table”. In one of the

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<sup>84</sup> Interview with Zvi Zamir, Ma’ariv, 8 May 1989.

many discussions in the Labor Party on Israel's future borders, she said that she was for those "borders that we think are necessary for us and then accept them—I am prepared to give up territory, not the entire territory, God forbid. I too have a map". Her formula was secure borders that would make the Arabs think twice before attacking Israel and if that happened it would be possible to protect the country with a minimal number of casualties.

When it came to the issue of Arab laborers in Israel, her position was more determined. Israel was responsible for the welfare of those who were under her responsibility, but she considered the fact that tens of thousands of Palestinians were working in Israel no less than a national disaster. She was appalled by the ease with which Israel became used to cheap Arab labor. At one point, she even suggested that Israeli children be mobilized during the fruit-picking season instead of employing Arabs. On the issue of settlements in the occupied territories, she supported the position of Dayan, Allon and Galili who said Israel should settle only in such areas that it wanted to retain in the future such as the Jordan Valley and the Golan Heights, strengthen the greater Jerusalem area, settle in territories that belonged to Jews before 1948, settle only in sparsely populated Arab areas and on public and not private land and stay away from large Arab urban centers. Therefore, she supported settling of Jews in the Jordan Valley, the Golan Heights, the Greater Jerusalem area and from 1972 in the area between the Gaza Strip and northern Sinai known as the Gates of Rafiah. She was willing to condone settlements even in parts of the Gaza Strip. However, all settlement activity must be done with the approval of the cabinet. Among those who were opposed to this policy were Sapir, Eban and Yaacov Shimshon Shapira, respectively the finance, foreign and justice ministers.

In early 1973, the feeling prevailed that Israel had finally reached an era of quiet. The Knesset elections were due to be held in late October 1973 and the Labor Party leaders began to intensify their pressure on Golda to continue to lead the party and the country. Several days before she was due to travel to Washington, a mishap occurred that could have harmed the visit. Israeli airforce jets intercepted a Libyan passenger plane that entered Sinai on February 21. The Libyan pilot apparently failed to understand the signs the Israeli pilots made, telling him to land at an Israeli airforce base in Sinai. There was fear in Israel that the pilot could crash the plane with its passengers either on Dimona or over Tel Aviv. The plane was shot down over Sinai and its 150 passengers and crew were killed. The approval for the shooting was given by the Chief of Staff, David Elazar, himself. This resulted in massive criticism leveled at him and at the entire Israeli government for downing an unarmed civilian passenger plane. When Elazar (known to Israelis as Dado) took his leave from Golda before she flew to Washington, she told him: "You will have more hard days and I will not be here. I want to tell you



not only how much I appreciate you, I admire you, not only do I trust you, I have full confidence in you”.

In spite of these events, she never despaired of finding some arrangement with Egypt. On February 25 and 26, 1973, Kissinger met in Washington with a special emissary of Sadat, Hafez Ismail, who brought some new ideas. Egypt was now prepared to consider a comprehensive settlement with Israel that would start with an interim agreement on the Canal. Egypt still demanded total Israeli withdrawal from all the territories and Arab control over East Jerusalem, as well the restoration of Palestinian rights, something they never elaborated on its meaning. Egypt was prepared to demilitarize parts of Sinai in return to similar Israeli demilitarization of parts of the Negev. This meant in effect an Israeli recognition of Egypt’s sovereignty on Sinai in return for Egyptian recognition of Israel’s security needs. Egypt was even willing to consider the presence of a few Israelis, in civilian clothes, in certain parts of Sinai. Egypt also said it was ready to discuss normalization arrangements with Israel, but all this would be predicated on parallel progress on resolving the issue of the Arab refugees. Egypt was then thinking in terms of ending the state of war, Israeli navigation in the Suez Canal and the Straits of Tiran would also be on the agenda. Full normalization such as an exchange of ambassadors and open borders for free movement of goods and people would have to wait until the signing of the full-fledged peace treaty. Kissinger later claimed that this was the farthest reaching Egyptian proposal but still, it did not involve open and direct negotiations. For years, Golda said, “if they won’t talk to us, how will they live with us”? Kissinger did transmit the contents of the Egyptian proposals to Rabin who handed them to Golda Meir. This Egyptian offer was not published for many years, neither was the Israeli response to Hafez Ismail’s ideas. Few in Israel knew the extent to which their prime minister was willing to go at the time, aimed mainly at breaking the deadlock.<sup>85</sup>

Before she met Nixon, she had a meeting with Defense Secretary Elliot Richardson and raised the innovative idea of Israel building a fighter plane on its own, but she made sure to ask that the Americans speed up the delivery of additional “Phantoms”. Rabin used the opportunity to elaborate on the importance of the 30 “Skyhawks” and 36 “Phantoms” for Israel. Golda repeated her argument that only a strong Israel would induce Sadat to negotiate. She also stated that the Soviet Union was about to supply Syria MIG 23 jets, forcing Israel to find an appropriate answer to this weapon. It turned out that after Israel got the additional planes from the United States, in addition to its own Israel assembled

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<sup>85</sup> Rabin, *Service Book*, p. 389. The transcripts of the meetings between Golda, Nixon and Richardson on March 1, 1973, are in the National Archives, College Park, MD.

“Kfir” planes, it would have a fleet of 450 fighter jets which the Americans considered highly respectable and more than adequate for her needs.

On March 1, 1973, she met the president at the White House. She was accompanied by the outgoing ambassador Rabin and the incoming one Dinitz. On the American side, Nixon asked Kissinger and General Scowcroft, Kissinger’s deputy in the National Security Council, to attend. She congratulated the president on the conclusion of the Vietnam War and explained the reasons for the shooting down of the Libyan plane. The president then raised a novel idea. He asked that Israel give him its full trust. Knowing that elections were about to take place in Israel, and fearful of an oil crisis, he said that there was growing public pressure on him to do something in the Middle East. He was convinced that Israel found itself in a powerful position which led Egypt to despatch emissaries to Washington. He asked that Israel agree that Kissinger would examine privately Egypt’s position on what it was willing to negotiate. For that purpose he wanted to know Israel’s position. Kissinger, he said, would conduct the talks with the Egyptians “off the record”. Nixon added that the matter was so sensitive that only Kissinger was the right man for this task as he was an expert in ambiguous language and repeated what he had heard from Zhou En Lai about Kissinger being the only man who could speak for an hour and a half without saying anything. Golda said that she knew the Americans were talking with Egypt, a country that now wanted the Americans to do for them the job of moving Israel, having despaired of the Russians doing this. They wanted security, she said, not sovereignty. Israel accepted the partial settlement idea for the Suez Canal, but the line of withdrawal must be temporary and subject to final settlement negotiations. In so doing, Israel would be abandoning its natural defense line but would prove that it was willing to take chances for peace. Israel wanted the Canal cleared and its operations resumed on condition that the two sides, now separated from each other, would not shoot. She agreed to the return of Egyptian civilians to the Canal cities because that would only strengthen the chance that fighting would not be resumed. She agreed to a limited number of Egyptian policemen on the East Bank of the Canal. At this stage, Israel would not insist on Israeli shipping through the Canal although it would insist on the principle, while not realizing that this meant that they gave Sadat an honorable way out. She went further and said Israel was ready to withdraw to the lines of the passes. Nixon asked point blank that the State Department would not be involved in these contacts. Kissinger, who had already met with Hafez Ismail, thought that this time the Egyptians would be reasonable. Kissinger confirmed that Israel had never raised such proposals and asked for permission to hold Proximity Talks between Egypt and Israel under American auspices in the course of the next session of the General Assembly in New York. This would come

after the Knesset elections in Israel which the Americans assumed and prayed would keep Golda in power.

Golda suggested that the Americans ought to tell the Russians that they were talking with the Egyptians, however, claimed Golda, the Russians had promised the Egyptians MIG 23 jets and the training of their pilots in Russia. The Americans said that while the Russians should be kept in the picture, the negotiations would be undertaken only by them. It was agreed that messages would be delivered by Kissinger to Dinitz who would relay them directly to the prime minister. Foreign Minister Eban would be kept out of this loop. The State Department too would not be a party to the talks. At the end of the meeting, Golda once again raised the idea that the Israel Aviation Industries would build an Israeli-made jet fighter and asked for American approval to build at least 100 planes (they were eventually given the name Lavie: “Lion”). She of course also raised the problem of the immigration of Russian Jews and asked for presidential intervention on the eve of a planned Nixon-Brezhnev summit.

Golda did go to much length on the issue of the partial settlement, probably without getting the prior approval of either the cabinet or at least the Ministerial Committee for Foreign Affairs and Security. These proposals of course were not publicized until many years later, only adding to the feeling that Golda may have missed a chance for peace. Did she really make up her mind this time to break the deadlock? She aspired for peace and thought for many years after leaving office that she had done much to promote peace. However, many of her expressions in Israel and abroad did not plant this feeling either in Israel or in the Arab states, nor in America. The title that was often used to describe her, that of being intransigent, stuck, perhaps because she was a woman. She felt that she could, for the time being, calm down somewhat because she knew of and supported the IDF defense strategy later known by the derisive name “The Concept”. The IDF was convinced that as long as Syria and Egypt did not obtain offensive weapons, chiefly the latest model jet fighters, ground-to-air missiles as well as short-range ground-to-ground missiles from the Russians, it would be unlikely that they would launch a war in the foreseeable future. No one rejected the possibility of a limited war to achieve limited objectives. The assumption was that in case of war, a correct deployment of the IDF, including some 300 tanks in the Canal Zone and 180 tanks on the Golan Heights, would enable the front line units to hold out until the arrival of the reserve forces. For this, the IDF felt it needed an alert of at least 24 hours, which it thought it would have. The IDF achievements in the War of Attrition and in the many operations against terrorists only instilled in it an exaggerated sense of security. Sadat’s repeated statements about 1971 being a “year of decision” followed by similar declarations for 1972, in the course of which nothing happened, only strengthened the contempt it held for Sadat and

his army. Golda may have thought that the Arab leaders followed a logical train of thought and would realize that war would mean suicide for them. She ignored the element of the restoration of Arab honor and wiping the defeat of 1967.

One day her younger sister Clara proposed to her that she prepare a list of items most important for Israel and ask Sadat to prepare a similar list of items vital for Egypt. If Sinai was that important for him, why not give it back to him for something vital for Israel. Eventually they might realize they could reach an agreement. “Why don’t you put yourself in Sadat’s shoes”, she asked.<sup>86</sup> Golda did display much patience but rejected the idea that she would ever put herself in Sadat’s shoes. She had well-defined ideas and persistently refused to think in Arab terms, fearing this would indicate weakness leading to concessions. It was hard for her to believe that the Arab leaders read carefully all her speeches in the Knesset, in the party and in other forums and her many interviews, and were as impressed of what she said exactly as she was impressed by what they said. Contacts through secret channels did not convince her as they similarly did not convince Sadat and Assad. Yet, in March 1973, she did authorize the United States to enter into secret contacts with Egypt to raise before them the latest Israeli ideas.

In retrospect, her views did not hasten the war, but they did not promote peace, either. In March 1973, however, she did allow the United States to continue their contacts with the Russians and the Egyptians towards an overall or comprehensive settlement and agreed to Proximity Talks. She only demanded that Israel be kept in the picture and that no deals would be made behind her back. This slow diplomacy fit her mood that exuded confidence. In fact, she was telling the Americans that “we never had it so good.” She came to the meeting with Nixon in a very good mood. When he asked her what she intended to do with Rabin who was about to return to Israel, she said, “it depends how he behaves”.<sup>87</sup> She returned to Israel knowing that for the time being there would be no American-originated surprises, certainly not during election year in Israel. Nixon knew she needed to get over this hurdle peacefully. Meanwhile, she could once again ask her comrades the same question that took place on the situation in the party on the eve of the 1969 Knesset elections:

If a comrade says: I want that the party platform will specify what to do to reach peace—he must say what should be written... What else can be done. If we move, we have war at once. What they accept is that the Mediterranean is Israel’s western border... I ask in all sincerity and friendship, with no tinge of argument, in God’s name, have you got an inkling what we should do? All the more so, say what we have to do. What we have to do and have not done,

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**86** Meir, *My Mother Golda Meir*, p. 196.

**87** Rabin, *Service Book*, p. 389.

and if there is no proposal, than the saying that we are not doing enough, and we have to do, and we need peace, is itself bound to sow doubts, disquiet, and it's not a saying that strengthens us.<sup>88</sup>

She did not change her position until she resigned. She was a prisoner of her worldview that had crystallized decades earlier. She was not usually subjected to other views because a sort of collective thinking developed as seen mostly in the sessions in the “kitchen”, far away from the public eye. Golda never liked criticism which she took personally as raising doubts about her abilities and talents.

In one area she did register an enormous achievement that accompanied her to her dying day and still has a vast impact on Israel, the immigration of Soviet Jews. She did not rest when it came to promoting this struggle and during her years as prime minister some 100,000 Jews arrived from the Soviet Union. For her, this meant the closing of the circle. She witnessed and helped launch the beginning of this process in 1948 and lived to see its implementation. She devoted endless hours to this, although she preferred to do so quietly with little publicity. Until 1969, this topic was secret and censorable. It suited her style of work, especially in what she considered “Holy Work”. Here things were well defined and not philosophic. There was total unanimity in Israel on this issue and the argument focused on the methods to be employed. Many wanted massive public campaigns to put pressure on the leaders of the Kremlin saying this was the only way they understood. Others wanted to continue the quiet diplomacy. Initially, she wanted to merge the two methods. But by late 1969, she came to the conclusion that the policy of secret diplomacy was no longer useful and Israel must now awaken international public opinion. An international conference was organized in Brussels in 1972 with the participation of the prime minister. It was also the last public appearance overseas of the aged Ben-Gurion. There was hardly a meeting with a head of state, ministers, members of Congress and Senators in which she did not raise the issue of Soviet Jewry. She often spoke about this in the Knesset. She spent long hours with those Jews who immigrated from the Soviet Union and wanted to know what could be done to increase the flow of Jews from Russia. She was unaware of the problem that arose in the mid 1970's, when more and more Russian Jews, ostensibly on their way to Israel, dropped out in Vienna and opted to go to the United States, Canada and even Germany. One of the ironies that accompanied this immigration was that the larger it grew, so did the feeling of discrimination among Sephardi Jews in Israel. Golda was no longer alive when the doors were finally opened in October 1989. Since then, Israel absorbed more than a million and a quarter Russian immigrants whose impact on the state was enormous.

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<sup>88</sup> Labor Party Central Committee, 11 September 1969.

In the spring of 1973, the world appeared to her to be rosy. At the end of 1972, she had already decided to retire after the Knesset elections, while her image was good. She felt that she would leave Israel in a much better condition than the country she had received in 1969. But the events of the spring of 1973 forced her to change her plans.

## 17 Into the Abyss (1973)

In the spring and summer of 1973, it seemed as though many Israelis, with growing restlessness mixed with apathy, resigned themselves to the fact that at least until the coming elections at the end of October, there would be no major political or other developments. Keen observers at home and abroad noted a sense of lethargy and lack of interest in the central issue of war and peace. Even social and economic issues seemed to have been shunted to the margins. In those days, the Labor Party elders focused their attention on two goals: the first was to prevent Golda from making true her threat to resign from all political activity after the elections to the seventh Knesset. The second was tied to the first, to win the coming elections and form the next government. This time they did not even bother to hide their true intentions: to preserve power in their hands in order to prevent Menachem Begin from taking over the country and moving it into a rightist direction. They suspected that on some issues there were not too many major differences between Labor and Herut. The differences were more in style rather than content, in the leaders' personalities and less in ideology.

In the course of the winter of 1972 and spring of 1973, strenuous efforts were exerted to persuade Golda to continue leading the nation and party during the entire term of the next Knesset. For her part, she had come to the correct conclusion that she should resign at the end of 1973. Indeed, in October 1972, in the course of an interview with the Italian journalist Orianna Fallaci, Golda was asked: "Will you really retire?" She replied:

I swear to you. Look: In May of next year I will be seventy five. I am old. I am exhausted. My health is basically good, my heart is functioning, but I cannot continue in this lunatic pace forever. If you would have known how many times I say to myself: the hell with everything, the hell with everybody, I have done my share, now let others do their share. Enough, enough, enough. There are days when I want to pack up and disappear without telling anyone. If I have stayed until now, if I am here for another minute, it is out of a sense of duty and for no other reason. I cannot toss everything out of the window. Yes, there are many who do not believe that I will leave. Well, let them start believing, I will even give you a date: October 1973. There will be elections and immediately after them—goodbye.<sup>1</sup>

Fallaci's reaction to this was simple: "I don't believe it. Everybody says that you will change your mind because you cannot sit doing nothing".<sup>2</sup> And in fact few believed her. One who did was Simcha Dinitz who coveted the post of ambassador to Washington that would become vacant upon Rabin's return to Israel.

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1 Fallaci, Interview, p. 119.

2 Ibid.

When Dinitz's candidacy was first raised, Eban was adamantly opposed. He knew well that Dinitz as ambassador in Washington would mean the continuation of the tradition of bypassing his Foreign Ministry. Dinitz, he rightly feared, would maintain a direct line to the Prime Minister's Office leaving him in the shadows, groping for snippets of information that would never reach him directly. Foreign Ministry officials started to circulate highly uncomplimentary stories about Dinitz's modest intellectual equipment and his life style in the Israeli media, arguing that under this hallowed title, he would continue to be Golda's messenger boy in the American capital. But they could not claim that this was a purely political appointment. Dinitz, like Eban and Harman (but unlike Rabin) rose in the Foreign Service, but won the plum because he hitched his wagon to Golda.<sup>3</sup> If Eban had serious misgivings about giving Dinitz the most important and respectable embassy, he did not voice them publicly in order to avoid a confrontation with the prime minister. He knew well that if Golda was determined to send Dinitz to Washington, nothing he did or say would sway her, and he yielded. And so Dinitz, who started his public career as a night watchman at the Israel embassy in Washington in the 1950's while doing graduate work at Georgetown University, found himself twenty years later presenting his credentials to President Nixon in the White House. His replacement as director general of the Prime Minister's Office and Golda's senior political adviser was Mordechai Gazit, who had served as bureau chief for Foreign Minister Golda Meir in the late 1950's. Since then, he had served as minister plenipotentiary in Washington, director general of the Foreign Ministry and even carried out research in a prestigious American university. As the years passed, Gazit became more introvert and taciturn, and as he deepened his understanding of Israel's foreign relations, he became increasingly dour. Unlike Dinitz, who was full of life and often the life of many parties in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, Gazit preferred to busy himself reading and writing. Almost at once there were problems of communication between him and Golda. She selected him because of their past work together and respected his intellectual prowess highly. In any case, she was leaving soon, so why test a new man. He knew he also got the job because Golda was not inclined to experiment with new people. She may have feared that the party would impose on her someone who was not suited. This was a sign of age: she wanted people around her that she knew and trusted. Gazit, whose mind was like a cultivated garden, demanded of his subordinates orderly thinking and clear oral and written expression. He disliked slovenly thinking and speech and sought perfection. Above all, he was loyal

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<sup>3</sup> Roger Morris, *Uncertain Greatness—Henry Kissinger and American Foreign Policy*, New York, 1977, p. 254.



to Golda and never criticized her even privately. But he did not mesh easily into the immediate circle around the prime minister and had to fight for time with her. In some respects, he resembled the late Ya'acov Herzog and on occasion exasperated the prime minister when he insisted on clarity and attention to detail. To some, he resembled Moshe Sharett. She clearly preferred Dinitz for his good cheer and lively stories, but once she appointed Gazit, she was determined he would run her office until she retired. Gazit found much understanding and solace from Galili, mainly when it came to drafting position papers and speeches.

In the spring of 1973, the Labor Party elders renewed their concentrated offensive on Golda to change her mind, to lead the party to victory in the coming elections and form the next government. How would the party face the voters, they asked, if they did not know who would lead it after the elections and form the new cabinet? It was not fair to jump off the wagon at this juncture. A weightier argument was linked to Moshe Dayan. Sapir warned her that if she did not head the party and the next government, there was a good chance that Dayan would abandon the government and join a Herut-led cabinet headed by Begin. This threat (which materialized four years later under different circumstances) was enough to bring her to reconsider her position. She was also told that major world leaders, chief among them President Nixon, expected to know who would lead Israel, and with whom they would have to negotiate with in the future and that her staying in office had a direct bearing on Israel-American relations. She was told that Nixon preferred her thinking and that she was the only Israeli leader strong enough to make concessions if and when the time came. If he thought so, he never gave it public expression lest it be seen as interference in Israel's domestic politics. Whatever the reasons, she was more amenable to reconsider. She also remembered that during her last conversation with Nixon in March 1973, a timetable was agreed upon focusing on renewed American mediation between Israel and Egypt to start after the Israeli elections. She did not trust that other Israeli leaders would be able to withstand possible American pressure and may have thought this was not the right time to abandon the reins.

She also examined potential candidates who could succeed her, and she disqualified each one of them for various reasons. She did not think Allon was a strong leader under duress. She admired Dayan's leadership, original and creative thinking and thought he was capable of becoming prime minister. But she also saw him often yield and not insist on his views. She was not sure if she wanted to leave the country in his hands. How would he deal with social and economic questions? His personal lifestyle, well known to the Israeli public, did not endear him to her puritan mind. She did not respect Shimon Peres and never saw him as a candidate for the top position. Memories of the struggles between the Foreign and Defense Ministries in the 1950's and early 1960's were too fresh.

Above all, she never forgave the secession of Rafi. As far as she was concerned, Rafi was Peres. He was the one who engineered Rafi's split from Mapai—an unforgivable sin. For that reason, in the spring of 1973, she torpedoed Yitzhak Navon's candidacy for the presidency of Israel, and chose instead a Weizmann Institute scientist—Professor Efraim Katsir. Navon too was tainted with the Rafi secession from Mapai. She rightly assumed that Eban had no chance and the only serious candidate who would be acceptable to all party factions was Pinchas Sapir, in spite of his “dovish” views. But he adamantly refused even to consider his candidacy.

Finally, it was Sapir who convinced her to carry on. He was helped by the family who told her that her health was good and that she had never ran away from a challenge. They also stressed that Israel never had it so good, as she herself had told Nixon and Kissinger in their recent meetings in March 1973. They said that when the time came, she would retire in an honorable and impressive fashion after half a century of party and public service, and all this would take place after the anticipated smashing victory in the next elections. Prior to retiring, she would also determine the makeup and policies of the next government. And so, if in October 1972 she had been certain the time had come for her to retire, in April 1973 she no longer was. Finally, as always, the good trooper Golda yielded and on June 17, she informed her party that she would continue in office. A sigh of relief was heard in the party headquarters.

Another matter preoccupied her in those days: she eagerly awaited the publication of the Report of the Prime Minister's Commission on Children and Youth in Distress, due to be released in the early summer. The Commission had been appointed by the government of Israel on February 21, 1971, after the outbreak of the “Black Panthers” rioting in 1970, and included 128 of the leading educators, sociologists, social workers and civil servants and other experts in those fields. Their task was to study problems connected with juvenile delinquency and ways to deal with it. The name of the committee was later changed to “The Prime Minister's Committee for Children and Youth in Distress”. It was headed by Professor Israel Katz, the head of the National Insurance Institute. Among those who headed the many teams was her daughter-in-law Aya Meir. They examined issues such as education, income guarantees, housing and social services. Golda took the committee very seriously and participated in six of its plenary sessions to stress its importance. But the discussions became prolonged since some of its members extended the items under discussion and dealt with the broad questions of the state's responsibility for social services. The report was issued at the end of June and Golda did something highly unusual for her: she held a press conference to discuss the report and its recommendations. The experts determined that at the time, there were some 160,000 Israeli youth in social, economic

and educational distress, the majority of Sephardi origin who lived in slum neighborhoods of the big cities, development towns and even in some moshavim. According to the findings, 25,000 of them were in deep distress and were very likely to be rejected by the IDF, with the consequent social stigma.<sup>4</sup> To her credit, she insisted on raising this explosive issue even on the eve of the elections in an effort to unite the country around this highly problematic situation that tarnished Israel's image as a progressive, just and equal society. She noted that because of Israel's coalition regime, dealing with this problem was split among various ministries each headed by minister that came from a different party. Labor held the Finance, Labor, Education and the Housing Ministries, the National Religious Party held Interior and Social Welfare, Mapam held Immigrant Absorption. This meant duplication, waste and lack of efficiency in utilizing precious human and financial resources. At the press conference, she stressed that she would not permit the harsh reality and the stark facts to be buried in Israel's bureaucratic labyrinth. She understood that Israel would have to adopt an entirely new policy to eradicate poverty that held explosive social and political potential. She announced that she would personally assume responsibility for implementing the recommendations in housing, education and affording equal opportunities for all. She placed these issues on the same pedestal as defense. One of the consequences of the report was Golda's decision to establish the "Youth Authority" in the Prime Minister's Office to coordinate the government activities in this sphere. The publication of the committee's report may have also persuaded her to carry on as prime minister.

Now was not the time, she probably thought, to flee from this responsibility. If she went, this segment of the population would lose its champion and defender. She may have wanted to end her political life by carrying out a quiet social revolution, in righting the wrongs and rebuilding a just and equal social order. But these were pipe dreams. She had long ago lost her revolutionary fervor. Yet every expression of injustice bothered her. She may have suspected that none of her possible successors would devote enough time and thought to this issue and, like her, prefer to focus on security and foreign affairs.

In April 1973, the sound of drums heralding an approaching war began to be heard. This, more than other considerations, may have persuaded her to stay on. On April 2, 1973, Sadat granted an interview to "Newsweek's" correspondent Arnaud de Borchgrave, in which he openly declared his intention to launch a war against Israel to end the political-military stalemate. Sadat had hoped to impose on the powers a more serious attitude to the Middle East problem, and to compel

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<sup>4</sup> Report of the Prime Minister's Committee on Children and Youth in Distress, Jerusalem, 1973.

Israel to start withdrawing from the occupied territories.<sup>5</sup> A week after the publication of this interview, De Borchgrave arrived in Israel and sought to persuade some of its decision makers, the prime minister among them, that this time Sadat had to be taken seriously. But he was politely rebuffed. Israel's leaders did not believe that Egypt was capable of undertaking the enormous effort of crossing the Suez Canal without massive Soviet military aid.

But as more intelligence was gathered indicating Egypt's intention to launch a limited war in May 1973, Golda wanted to be reassured. On April 18, 1973, she held a major discussion in her residence and not in her office to prevent leaks and not to create unnecessary panic of the eve of Israel's twenty-fifth Independence Day celebrations. Among the participants were the prime minister, Minister Galili, Defense Minister Dayan, the IDF chief of staff Elazar, the director of military intelligence Zeira, the director of the Mossad Zamir, the director general of the Prime Minister's Office Gazit and several of their senior aides. Ely Zeira presented the Intelligence Branch assessment and said that while there were signs on the ground for war preparations, he assumed that there was a low probability of less than fifty percent and perhaps even twenty percent for the possibility of war breaking out.

He assumed that even if the Egyptians attempted to cross the Suez Canal, the IDF intelligence would have several days time to provide the proper alert. Golda was not assured and asked pointedly: how Israel would know of the possibility of an attack. Zeira took upon himself to allay Golda's fears by telling her that the IDF was aware of Egyptian commanders visiting the front, troops being moved forward, of a bolstered aerial defense system and additional artillery batteries. He tried to convince her that the IDF was fully capable of dealing with any surprise. But she persisted in asking him questions such as how Israel would get the warning, how much time would be available and what countermeasures the IDF would undertake. The last thing she needed before an election campaign was war. The general stated with assurance that Syria would not embark on war without Egypt and that both experienced serious domestic problems that would bar them from going to war. True, the IDF intelligence did detect certain military preparations on the Egyptian side of the Suez Canal and on the Syrian side of the cease-fire lines on the Golan Heights. But the evaluation was that while the IDF must follow closely these hostile warlike preparations, war was not expected in the near future. Zeira added that it was unlikely that the Russians wanted war and if it broke out they would quickly bring it to an end. He still believed in the "concept" that said that Egypt and Syria would not launch a war as long

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<sup>5</sup> Newsweek, 9 April 1973.

as the Soviet Union did not provide them with certain weapons systems such as advanced long-range jet fighter-bombers, and medium-range ground-to-ground missiles that could hit Israeli population centers to deter Israel from hitting Cairo or Alexandria.

In direct opposition to this view, the head of the Mossad, was much less certain. He thought that at this stage Egypt was already ready to launch a war and that this possibility had to be taken seriously. The Chief of Staff David Elazar, too, was not fully convinced of Zeira's assessment and thought that this time the threat was serious. Yet he decided not to create panic and not to call up the reserves and ordered the IDF to refresh its war plans.

Elazar did not reject the possibility of a war breaking out but was convinced that if it started, the IDF would inflict such a blow on the Arabs that they would need at least five years to rebuild their forces. Participants in the discussion also assumed (correctly as it turned out) that Syria would not go to war alone without Egypt and that in both countries there were serious internal problems that would preclude war. The IDF Intelligence continued to detect certain military preparations on the West Bank of the Canal, and beyond the cease-fire lines on the Golan Heights. But its assessment remained that while the IDF must pay close attention to these moves, war was not expected in the near future. The expression was "low probability" for war. The chief of staff did take the threats seriously and still in April, ordered the commanders of the southern and northern commands, as well as the commanders of the air force and the armored corps, to present their emergency plans. These plans, known by their code name "Blue-White", were presented to Elazar in early May.<sup>6</sup> In that discussion, it was also agreed that Israel would transmit its assessments to the United States. Golda said simply: "I propose that we tell them everything, that there is certain information, we do not yet discern anything on the ground, we are pretty strong, we shall keep in touch with you". The Hafez Ismail proposals were not mentioned or discussed at that time, not even in later discussions, nor the possibility that Sadat would embark on a limited war along the Suez Canal, not to advance towards Israel but

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<sup>6</sup> On the May/June 1973 alert see Hanoach Bartov, *Dado: 48 Years and 20 Days*, Tel Aviv, 1978, Vol. I, pp. 238–270; Dayan, *Milestones*, p. 569; Ma'ariv, 10 November 1989; Uri Bar-Yossef, *The Watchman Fell Asleep*, pp. 119–196; Report of the Agranat Commission to Investigate the Yom Kippur War, Tel Aviv, 1975; Yeshayahu Ben-Porat et al., *The Omission*, Tel Aviv, 1974; Eitan Haber, *There will be War Today: Memoirs of General Yisrael Lior*, Tel Aviv, 1987; Chaim Herzog, *The War of Atonement*, London, 1975; Eli Zeira, *The Yom Kippur War—Myth vs. Reality*, Tel Aviv, 1993; Golan, *Decision-Making in the Israeli High Command*; Richard Parker, *The Politics of Miscalculation in the Middle East*, Bloomington, IN, 1993, and Richard Parker, *The October War—A Retrospective*, Gainesville, FL, 2001.

to achieve a strategic change and then impose on the United States moves that would alter their position that to him seemed as a persistent support for Israel. He would use the limited gain to offer a plausible political solution that would focus on the beginning of Israeli withdrawal from Arab territories. No one asked what would happen if Sadat was satisfied with crossing the Canal and gaining some territory on the East Bank only. At that point, he could ask the Soviet Union to threaten the United States to change its policy. Such questions were apparently not asked by Kissinger and the American intelligence community. Israelis were still thinking in terms of a major war, while Sadat did plan a large-scale war, but to achieve limited territorial gains in order to jump start a political process. This is more or less what happened in October 1973.

The Israeli public was unaware of the growing amount of evidence showing Arab preparations for war. The Israel government decided not to alarm the population unnecessarily. No one wanted to harm the mood that accompanied the celebrations marking Israel's twenty-fifth Independence Day that this time included a massive military parade in Jerusalem. Golda stood on the reviewing stand for hours as the troops marched by. The General Headquarters also felt there was no need to alarm the public and shake its sense of security that was accompanied by an unprecedented economic prosperity. On April 10, an IDF elite unit, led by Ehud Barak, carried out a daring raid on terrorist headquarters in Beirut and killed some of those responsible for the Munich massacre. The raid, in James Bond style, created much shock in the Arab world and great deal of excitement in Israel and strengthened the people's trust in the armed forces. Israel awaited a retaliatory act, but it failed to materialize. Meanwhile, the IDF continued its preparation of various contingency plans and on May 9, they were presented in the "Pit", the underground war room in Tel Aviv, to the prime minister. General Ely Zeira made the presentation, showing in great detail the deployment and capabilities of the Syrian and Egyptian armies and the options they had. He did not think war would break out. At worst, he thought it was a very low probability. The Chief of Staff thought otherwise and demanded that the war threat be taken more seriously. He was supported by Golda, Dayan and Galili.<sup>7</sup> Elazar ordered the IDF to complete certain preparations and absorb new equipment but refrained from calling up the reserves. All this was done quietly and cost the country 60 million Israel pounds, a very respectable sum in those days. On May 21, in a General Headquarters meeting, Dayan turned to the Generals and said: "We, the government, are telling you, the General Headquarters, gentlemen, please prepare for war. The IDF must be ready for an Egyptian and Syrian attack on Israel at the end of the

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<sup>7</sup> Bartov, Dado, pp. 262–263.

summer, without Jordan. The army must be ready for the resumption of the war from June, because the Arab forces are now fully concentrated along the lines and their plans completed”.<sup>8</sup>

Dayan repeated his views in other military forums, but outwardly he kept his cool. Ely Zeira assumed that Sadat and Assad were engaged in saber rattling to impress the two superpowers on the eve of the second Nixon-Brezhnev summit to be held in the United States in June. Zeira was convinced that nothing would happen. As the summer months wore on and nothing extraordinary happened, his views were listened to more seriously. Elazar’s standing was somewhat tarnished. He was seen as too scared, as one ready to spend huge sums of money on idle preparations. Israel could now resume its peaceful life without changing its policy. The question why the Arabs did not attack in May 1973 has not yet been satisfactorily answered. The most plausible answer is that the Arab attack that was planned for May 1973 did not take place because Sadat and Assad were warned at the last minute by Brezhnev who did not want any war to harm his forthcoming summit with Nixon. He may have feared that if the Arabs won, the United States would accuse the Soviet Union of fanning the flames and would reconsider its willingness to sign a series of détente agreements. If Israel won, the Soviet Union would be seen as once again suffering a defeat and would be compelled to come to the aid of its Arab allies. War in the Middle East in May 1973 was the last thing Brezhnev wanted. He promised Sadat that in the summit he would seek to obtain an American promise to impose an Israeli withdrawal in return for the end of state of war without direct negotiations and certainly with no binding peace treaty.<sup>9</sup> During the summit, as Kissinger relates, he woke up Nixon in the middle of the night in San Clemente and raised this proposal. Nixon did not react and Brezhnev may have thought he had done his best to bring about a diplomatic solution to the ongoing crisis. Hence, in the future, no one would blame him for not making the effort if the Arabs pursued a military option. Immediately after the summit, the Russians resumed shipments of military supplies to Egypt and a small number of Russian advisers secretly returned to Egypt, from where they were expelled in July 1972. The Egyptian army did not alter its deployment in the Canal Zone and continued exercising the crossing of the Canal and other preparations for war.

Golda accepted the Military Intelligence evaluation with a heavy heart. Being by nature a very skeptical woman, she wanted additional proof. But she was

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<sup>8</sup> Dayan, *Milestones*, p. 570; Bartov, *Dado*, p. 270.

<sup>9</sup> Yoel Ben-Porat, “An Error in May—a Surprise in October”, *Ma’arachot*, July–August 1985, pp. 2–9.

also a political animal and had to take into account that another war would have destroyed the Labor Party's election campaign slogan that Golda and the party were responsible for Israel's apparent security and economic prosperity. If she were to use a war as an excuse to rally the country behind the Labor Party, this could be seen as placing narrow party interests above the national interest. Since nothing happened during the summer, she finally tended to go along with Zeira's claim that the May 1973 alert had been a false alarm. Although it was not easy for her to suppress her intuitive fears, politically she thought that was the right thing to do. There was no definite proof that the Arabs were about to launch a war that summer or even in the fall. During the days of tension, Golda did not change her schedule. The public did not suspect that something was amiss regarding Egypt's and Syria's intentions. Those who suspected did not voice their fears openly. This was a new situation for Golda. She was not used to operating in a situation of uncertainty and not being able to predict what would happen soon. Since she was unfamiliar with the mentality and psychology of the leaders of Egypt and Syria, and it is doubtful whether she ever read in full the fine print of the intelligence community collection of their profiles, and since she never wanted to put herself in Sadat's shoes, she was outwardly calm. However, her intuition indicated to her that while Israel could live a number of additional years in a no-war no-peace situation, Sadat found himself in an untenable situation. The IDF senior commanders did their best to allay her fears. And since not a single major personality, such as Dayan, Allon or Galili, presented convincing proof to the contrary it was easier for her to adopt Zeira's forceful position.

In the midst of this tension, Golda celebrated her 75<sup>th</sup> birthday. At her request, there were no official celebrations. She received thousands of cables and letters from her many admirers in Israel and overseas. They expressed their love, admiration and appreciation for what she had achieved and wished her long life and good health. She was deeply moved by a note from Ben-Gurion:

Today I send my frank congratulations, because you are 12 years younger than I, and your life work is not yet done, and you still have things to do, and a few decades and creative projects still await you, some of them only you can produce. Go and be successful, go back to continue your blessed work for the decades to come (I would not dare to say centuries). Your admirer and friend, David Ben-Gurion.

She felt that the rift had been healed, mainly by time. One of the few events marking her birthday was done with her approval and took place in the garden of her home in Ramat Aviv. It was strictly for family and close friends, among them a few who had accompanied her for decades. The organizers were the "boys" Sam Rothberg and Lou Boyar. They arranged for a modest garden reception for some thirty people. In addition to the family, there were Shirley and Meyer Weisgal, Abe



and Zena Harman, Lou Kadar, Regina and Moshe Medzini, their son and granddaughter, and Pinchas Sapir, the only member of the cabinet present. The mood was somber and restrained with few speeches. Rothberg and Boyar, Weisgal and Harman lauded Golda for “being Golda”. She replied to her well-wishers (in English) and enumerated her achievements that were above and beyond any dream she ever had: her immigration to Palestine, raising a family in this country, the struggle for independence and her leadership of Israel, a country seemingly at peace and prosperity. The future looked bright. To some present, she looked somewhat withdrawn, lost in thought. Few knew of the military tension and preferred to explain that her rather heavy mood was due to excitement and fatigue. Perhaps she was still not too happy with her decision to remain in office.

By that time, she had made up her mind not to retire after the elections. Golda would not desert the battlefield in the face of a military threat to Israel. Like the good and disciplined soldier that she was, she would remain at her post. On June 17, she informed her party that she would carry on. To the Secretary General of the Party, Aharon Yadlin, she wrote:

You are fully aware of my wavering whether to agree to be a candidate for the office of prime minister for an additional term. I explained the reasons in talks with comrades trying to convince them to release me from the candidacy for this post, but I failed. From them I learned that delaying my reply is causing embarrassing uncertainty, especially when the Alignment and the party must unite and prepare for the Knesset and the Histadrut election campaign. Therefore I saw it as my duty to no longer delay my reply to the demands of the comrades. I therefore decided not to end my public activity against the wishes of my comrades who share with me the responsibility, therefore, if the party is so willing, I will not remove my candidacy. You are permitted to bring my decision to the knowledge and decision of the party.

Only after the Yom Kippur War did she understand the enormity of the error she had committed when she yielded to the demands that she stay on. Had she retired in the spring of 1973 as she had planned, she would have left the stage in a respectable manner, a highly admired national leader, and would have become the soul and compass of both the nation and the party, a sort of an elder statesman whose advice and blessing is eagerly sought. On a number of occasions she complained that Israeli leaders never knew when to step down and all of them left office in tragic ways. It was Moshe Dayan who said that Israel devours its leaders. Ben-Gurion quit partly because of the Lavon Affair and was actually ousted by his colleagues, Sharett was forced out of office, Eshkol died a broken and beaten man. Golda resigned after a terrible war, Rabin resigned (in 1977) because of his wife’s illegal bank account and was assassinated in 1995 at the height of his glory and fame. Menachem Begin would leave office in 1983 as a casualty of the First Lebanon War, a broken man who would spend the last nine years of his life as a

recluse at home. Peres lost the elections to Netanyahu in 1996, Netanyahu lost to Barak in 1999 but had a comeback in 2009. Barak lost to Sharon in 2001, Sharon had a stroke in 2006 and was in a coma for years before he died. Ehud Olmert had to resign in 2008 because of corruption allegations. In 2015, he was sentenced to a term in jail. Golda now argued that as long as her health was good and she could fulfill her duties well, there was no reason for her to retire. Her family and friends were always praising her public appearances, her indefatigable performance, and the enormous national and international acclaim that she won in her advanced age. Few knew of the signs of reappearance of her illness and that she was being treated more often. Those who knew kept quiet.

The military tensions left their mark on the nation's leadership. The events marking Israel's twenty-fifth Independence Day were celebrated in low key. Outwardly, her leaders exuded strength and confidence as they enumerated Israel's very impressive achievements. But they were also fully aware that all this could change overnight and that a possible war was lurking around the corner. Few leaders dared tell the public what they felt. The majority adopted the party line that claimed that Israel was a world class military power and its security situation had never been better. These points were made by Chaim Herzog, Moshe Dayan and Yigal Allon in many interviews on the eve of Independence Day. Rabin, back from Washington, made the point that Israel-America relations had never been better and there were no signs of pressure on Israel to change her policy. Jarring notes were sounded by Pinchas Sapir and Abba Eban. Sapir warned that the present military-political stalemate could not last forever and would either end by an imposed solution or because of war. Eban also expressed strong doubts how long Israel could retain the present situation. But their words were like voices in the wilderness and few Israelis were prepared to listen. Herzog did warn the army that it was becoming sloppy and not paying attention to small details such as proper care and maintenance of weapons. The prime minister was not too impressed with the criticism and preferred to ignore it. She knew Sapir and Eban would not resign and lacked the spine to fight for their views. Sapir's views hurt her much more than Eban's. She knew that he argued in closed meetings that the prolonged occupation was destroying Israeli society from within and undermining her moral standing. But he stated that he would do nothing to hurt the party's chances of winning the elections. Privately he expressed anger that he, the king maker, was impotent when it came to bringing about a change in Golda's and Dayan's dominant policies.

On May 20, Kissinger once again met with Sadat's special emissary Hafez Ismail for a six-hour meeting in Paris. The protocol indicates that Ismail expressed Sadat's disappointment that during Golda's visit to Washington in March, the United States promised to supply Israel with additional jet fighters.

He repeated Egypt's position that it was prepared to discuss the partial arrangement but needed a comprehensive agreement that would be linked to the solution of the Palestinian problem, one that would also include Syria and Jordan. Egypt was prepared to recognize certain security arrangements for Israel in the Sinai in return for Israeli recognition of full Egyptian sovereignty in the entire peninsula. He reiterated the Egyptian demand that the United States must be more evenhanded and fair. In the long conversation, Ismail hinted more than once that Egypt, being frustrated by the absence of a peaceful solution, or if it were defeated in a military action, could disintegrate and collapse.

Kissinger then suggested that the United States would be willing to undertake mediation only after Egypt made a proposal America could support—negotiations without prior conditions. Kissinger told Ismail that the unyielding Egyptian position helped Israel remain in the territories it had occupied in the Six Days War. The present freeze was the result of Egypt's uncompromising refusal to enter into negotiations without prior Israeli agreement for total withdrawal from Sinai, and this barred all progress. It is not clear whether the contents of this conversation were transmitted to Israel. By then it was becoming obvious that in the absence of any progress Egypt had nothing to lose by going to war. There was no mention in this conversation about the alert in Israel and the possibility that the region was sliding towards war. The Egyptian emissary reiterated his stand that full settlement with Israel, including normalization, would be predicated on progress on the issue of the Arab refugees. Ismail may have understood that at best, a partial arrangement in the Canal would be possible not before 1974 or even 1975. Kissinger went further and said that in the case of an interim agreement, the United States would be willing to state openly or covertly that it would not see the new line as the final one. He assumed that Israel would not object to such a presidential statement or even to full Egyptian sovereignty in Sinai in return for adequate security arrangements, including the possibility of stationing IDF soldiers in civilian clothes. But in May, similar to February, there was no response from Sadat to these new ideas. It is clear that at no time Sadat was ready to enter into direct open or secret talks with Israel or even to reach an interim arrangement that would eventually lead to Israeli withdrawal from Sinai in return for temporary security arrangements. The Kissinger-Ismail talk in Paris was held before the June Nixon-Brezhnev summit and Sadat may have hoped that Brezhnev could convince Nixon to pressure Israel to withdraw with no negotiations. As expected Brezhnev did fulfill his role.

Ten days earlier, on May 9, 1973, Golda and Dayan met with King Hussein who was accompanied by his prime minister Zeid a Rifai. The king warned Israel of a well-coordinated Egyptian-Syrian attack but did not provide any timetable. Golda at least came out of this meeting feeling that Egypt had now embarked on

a course that could lead her to war. Dayan, Elazar and Zamir tended to think the same. Zeira, on the other hand, clung to his position that nothing significant was about to happen.

In June, another family event took place. Naomi, Golda's granddaughter, was married. The wedding was held in her kibbutz—Revivim, attended by family, close friends and members of the kibbutz. Golda, now the proud grandmother, was the center of attention. But once again, her mind was preoccupied. Although the tension abated and she knew the IDF was capable of repelling any attack, she also was aware that another war meant casualties, destruction and huge costs. She also knew that another war could bring about the exertion of superpower pressure on Israel to make concessions. In principle, she was not against concessions, but they had to be made at the right time and for an appropriate return, at least the ending of the state of war. She feared that concessions to the Arabs on the eve of elections, would only serve the interests of the newly created right-wing bloc called Likud. It was put together by General Ariel Sharon who had just retired from the IDF after twenty-five years of service.

In the middle of June, a highly respected world leader and a close friend of Golda's, Chancellor Willy Brandt came on the first official visit of a German Chancellor. With no hesitation, she willingly sent him an invitation. His credentials were more than impressive: he was a personal friend of hers and of Israel and had been to Israel in the past as Mayor of Berlin. He was anti-Nazi from an early age and spent the war years in the underground in Nazi-occupied Norway. Golda was on hand at the airport, with an IDF honor guard, to greet him as he stepped off the Luftwaffe plane, with an Iron Cross painted on its fuselage. At a state dinner held in the Chagall Hall in the Knesset, she spoke (off the cuff) in moving terms about the visitor and the present state of Israeli-German relations. Few noticed that she was in pain. To her close friend Ya'acov Chazan she revealed:

You know, I now go daily to Hadassah hospital in Jerusalem. The excuse is to visit a friend. The truth is that the doctors have detected some irregular glandular changes. In am told it is not malignant, not cancerous, and you know, sometimes the doctors are right. Not always. May be this time they are. But to be on the safe side, so they say, they decided on preventive radiations. And I have been doing it for the past two days, as though I am visiting this poor friend. It is very tiring, deathly tiring. But after that I rise and travel to meetings with our distinguished guest (Brandt). I shall overcome this too. That's all we need—a prime minister ill with cancer at the time of such an important visit.<sup>10</sup>

The visit was declared a success, although in his private meetings with Golda, Brandt was highly critical of Israel's position and had some ideas about promoting

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<sup>10</sup> Tamir, ed., Golda, pp. 32–33.

Arab-Israel peace. But he had not come to embarrass his hostess by declaring them publicly. His speeches were full of praise for Israel's many achievements.

The hot summer wore on and brought another unexpected setback. A Mossad team sent to Europe to hunt the killers responsible for the Munich Massacre mistakenly killed a Moroccan waiter in the Norwegian resort town of Lillehammer. The members of the team blundered and were caught by the Norwegian police that linked them with an Israel Embassy employee in Oslo. Israel had to face the charges of a very friendly country that did not want any bloodshed on its territory. Worse was to come. On August 10, Israel Air Force planes intercepted a civilian Lebanese airliner flying from Tehran to Beirut. The arch killer George Habbash was reported to have been on board. When it was forced to land at an Israeli airbase, and the doors opened, Habbash was not on board and the rest of the passengers were allowed to continue their journey. Once again, embarrassing questions were asked: did the war on terror justify such means? Even if there was cast iron proof that a major enemy was on board, had not Israel adopted the same aerial piracy tactics of its enemies and kidnapped a plane? Golda never denied that she had authorized this action. But, as usual, when it came to Mossad and other secret services operations, she discussed this behind closed doors. This event as well as the Lillehammer affair created doubts regarding tactics used in a basically dirty war. Golda had no doubts: in this matter all means were proper to defend Israelis at home and abroad. She was determined that Israel must exert all effort to fight terror. The Munich Massacre haunted her and she was generous in authorizing operations designed to prevent attacks on Israelis. Many of these operations would remain secret for years to come.

During those hot summer days, she continued to work energetically on her memoirs with the help of the writer Rina Samuel, who was engaged to help Golda. The idea to write her autobiography was suggested to Golda by many publishers, who rightly sensed a bestseller. The last serious book about Golda had been written by her friend Marie Syrkin, and appeared in 1955. It was called "Woman of Valor" and did not elicit much interest or sales. An amended and updated version appeared in 1963, this time it was called "Golda Meir—Woman with a Cause". An updated version of this book appeared in 1969. After she became prime minister, a number of authors tried their hand at writing her biography. The results were usually a mixture of a few facts with much sentimental gushing. These were avidly read by the average Jewish readers in North America who did not want to be confused by too many facts, let alone criticism. That would be *lèse-majesté*. They preferred to be impressed with the great achievements of one of their own that became the living symbol of Israel and the Jewish people. In the early 1970's, two such books were written by Peggy Mann and Iris Noble. They won modest popularity. These writers made little attempt to grapple with the intricacies of

Israeli politics and Golda's role in their development. They may have thought that a critical biography would be seen as grist on the mills of Israel's many enemies. Golda's reason for the book was two-fold. Her aim in writing this book, she wrote in the introduction to "My Life", was "the hope that perhaps those who read this book will learn and understand a little more about Israel, Zionism and the Jewish people. I have told of some of the men and women whom I have known, some of the places I have seen, and above all, some of the incredible events in which I have participated." Since her book was intended primarily for non-Israeli and Jewish readers, she added detailed accounts of the origins of Zionism, the rise of Israel and its Labor Movement. The second reason was to make money, and this she did. During all her years in office, Golda had no other income apart from her salary and old-age Social Security pension and was unable to save much money. In the course of negotiations with the publisher Lord George Weidenfeld, she stated that she would not write about her private life nor settle personal accounts. She would not use secret information she had not reveal state secrets. To friends, she claimed that she needed this book like a "hole in the head" since she abhorred memoirs in which the writers tried to enhance their share in history. A well-known writer, Rina Samuel, was engaged to listen to Golda taperecord her memoirs, ask the right questions and then transcribe the details into a book.

An old friend spent the summer in Israel and Golda took pains to spend as much time with him as possible. He was the world-renowned cellist Pablo Casals, who was then in his early 90's, but still teaching and occasionally playing. He was visibly moved by every meeting with Golda and they talked about people they had known. To one such a conversation, Golda took along David Ben-Gurion and the conversation was filmed. Because of a misunderstanding, Golda missed Casals' last public appearance held in the Jerusalem Music Center at Mishkenot Sha'ananim. Casals played with Eugene Istomin and Isaac Stern (another close friend). Casals barely made his way to the platform and played his famous Catalan Bird Song that has become his symbol. Those lucky few who were there broke into tears. Many felt that this could well be, and it was, Casals' last public appearance. He died a few weeks later. Golda was devastated—why hasn't she been told he would be there? That summer, she also attended a ballet performance at the ancient Roman amphitheater in Caesarea where Vassili Nureyev danced Prokofief's "Prodigal Son". When she entered the amphitheater, the audience that numbered thousands rose and applauded her. To this crowd, Israel's cultural elite, she was still the beloved leader, although many opposed her views.

These were some of the more pleasant events of that summer. But there were also some unhappy events.

Golda adopted the manner then becoming current in Israel of appearing before high school and university students and answering their questions. Unlike

their peers abroad, the Israeli students were blunt and often quite rude to the prime minister. The subjects ranged mainly on the issue of war and peace. Her trite answers were: “We never had it so good. The Suez Canal is the best anti-tank ditch and the Arabs will not dare attack us”. But there were also many questions on the social gap in Israel, posed mainly by students of North African origin. She preferred to hanker back to the good old days of social equality. These answers did not satisfy the students. She had no answers to pressing issues and that resulted in catcalls, which annoyed her. These sessions, on which she insisted, trying to maintain some contact with Israel’s future generation, exhausted her emotionally and physically, but she persisted in holding them.

In the summer of 1973, Israel’s youth were more bothered than in the past. They sensed something was amiss. The country was veering towards the unknown, led by an uninspiring leadership that sought to preserve its power at all cost. It was evident that the present leadership insisted that it will designate the next generation of leaders who would be cast of the same mould. The Labor Party oligarchy did not want fresh blood. It preferred yes-men. Inspiring and exciting leaders frightened the conservative and aging leadership. Israel’s younger generation realized that the National Religious Party was perceptively moving closer to the right, abandoning its previous image of a tolerant and a moderate centrist party. They sensed that Herut, under Begin’s leadership, was about to get a new lease on life, having lost in seven election campaigns. Herut was able to draw new supporters, mainly Sephardi Jews who were impressed by the fact that Begin, the seventime loser, continued to struggle and never gave up hope. Herut was about to open its ranks to new elements, many of them immigrants or children of immigrants from Moslem countries. All parties looked for war heroes. One of them was Ariel Sharon who was snapped up by the Liberal wing of Gachal (the Herut-Liberal bloc) the moment he took off his uniform. A highly colorful and brave officer, his many exploits were already well-known to Israel’s youth. He had a short flirt with Labor and then found a warmer and safer shelter in the Liberal Party, who like him had little ideological commitment to any principle apart from the desire to survive and play a meaningful role in running the country.<sup>11</sup> In the summer of 1973, Sharon successfully put together a new parliamentary bloc that included Herut, the Liberals, the Free Center, the State List and parts of the Movement for Greater Israel. It was called the Likud (Unity). Some experts were predicting that Israel was on the verge of moving more to the

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<sup>11</sup> Uzi Benziman, *Does not Stop on Red*, Tel Aviv, 1985; on Ariel Sharon see Gadi Blum and Nir Chefetz, *The Shepherd—the Story of the Life of Ariel Sharon*, Tel Aviv, 2005; Uri Dan, *In Confidence with Ariel Sharon*, Tel Aviv, 2007.

nationalist right. Labor's leaders were aware that one of the key issues in the coming elections would be the future of the occupied areas. They would have to come up with a workable plan lest they lose voters to the right.

Until the elections, set for October 30, Labor had to deal with two major tasks. The first was to write the party's platform. The second was to put together a reasonable list of candidates for the Knesset. Five years after its unification, the Labor Party was still a bloc in which each of the three components demanded its share in jobs and paid special attention to its unique demands. There was need to satisfy all the demands of each group. In August 1973, Moshe Dayan prepared a ten-point plan for action in the territories for the next four years. Most of it was acceptable to the party elders. The controversial and disputed paragraphs had to do with the Defense Ministry's plan of building a deep-sea port and an adjacent city to be called Yamit, 40 kilometers south of the Gaza Strip. On a sweltering July day, Golda, accompanied by Dayan, traveled to the area to see for herself the proposed site. She also saw efforts to build housing for Palestinian refugees from the Khan Yunis area, and even entered a home to speak to its residents. The highlight of the visit was the Yamit area, then sand dunes. She trod heavily in the sand to a point where Dayan spread before her the plans. She and others present were quite impressed. Dayan knew how to "sell" ideas and hit the right nerve when he spoke of modern Zionism and pioneering. All of these ideas that appealed to Golda were to find expression in Yamit. They would also enhance Israel's security as Dayan intended to keep this area even if Israel would had to abandon the rest of Sinai in the framework of peace with Egypt. She had no special sentiments about Sinai and the plan appealed to her.

Convincing Golda was not enough. Opposition rose from Sapir, Eban, Allon and Bar-Lev, each for his own reasons. Sapir feared that building Yamit would be seen at home and abroad as a sign that Israel intended to hold this area forever, let alone the vast financial investment required. Eban feared an adverse international reaction. Bar-Lev asked how the Yamit residents would make a living and who would protect them. Allon was angry that the idea was Dayan's. But since the main opposition stemmed from Sapir and he was the one to fund the plan, there was need to find a way to convince him, especially as Dayan hinted darkly that if the plan was rejected, he would remove himself from the Knesset list of candidates leading to a rift in the party. The nightmare of Dayan splitting the party and joining Begin once again haunted the leaders. Golda asked the master formulator Galili to hone his pen and fashion the redeeming formula. He came up with a working paper known as the "Galili Document". It was a gem of obfuscation.

It stated that the Labor Party would not demand changing the status of the territories and the existing policy in Judea and Samaria and the Gaza Strip would



remain intact. A deep-sea port would be built in Yamit, more Jews would be settled in all parts of Jerusalem and a new neighborhood would be built near Nebi Samuel north of the capital. The “Open Bridges” policy would continue and there would be more investments in agriculture and industry in the territories in addition to resettling Palestinian refugees. The plan went into detail regarding housing and irrigation projects in the Gaza Strip as well as making it easier for Jews to acquire and build homes in the West Bank. Galili thought, with some justification, that this document would not arouse much international condemnation because in addition to the expansion of Jewish settlement in Judea and Samaria, there would also be help to the local Palestinian inhabitants. As expected, the draft of the document satisfied few, some saw in it the lesser evil, but it saved the party from a split. Sapir was angry that what he called “creeping annexation” now became part of the party platform, while Dayan said that he “could live with this plan”. However, when the party institutions were asked to approve the document, a mini revolt broke out.<sup>12</sup>

The party Secretary, Lova Eliav, a dove with firmly held principles, feared that such a document was bound to further alienate those Arabs who might in the future wish to enter into negotiations with Israel and would only strengthen the feeling among them that there was no one to talk to on the Israeli side and that the only way to break the stalemate was by use of military force, even at the price of the Arabs losing the next war. Eliav organized a campaign and tens of thousands of Israelis signed a petition to adopt another proposal. In the voting held in the party Secretariat on September 3, 1973, only 78 of the 161 members of that body voted in favor. The rest, almost half of the Secretariat, abstained rather than voting against. Party discipline overcame the doubts, but it left the party with a heavy heart. It was shown once again that when the party wished to appease the hawks among its ranks and possible future coalition partners such as the National Religious Party, it could bend its ideology and principles in an effort to find the lowest common denominator with the argument that at this sensitive time there must be “national consensus”.<sup>13</sup>

The selection of the party’s candidates for the Knesset list was slightly easier. In addition to the veterans, two former chiefs of staff were added: Yitzhak Rabin and Chaim Bar-Lev, who was already serving in the cabinet. The former head of the IDF Intelligence Branch and currently Golda’s adviser on anti-terror warfare, General Aharon Yariv, was also included. Excluded from the list was maver-

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<sup>12</sup> On the Galili Document see Dayan, *Milestones*, pp. 553–560; Ben-Porat, *Conversations*, pp. 80–84; the text of the document is printed in Ya’acobi, *The Government*, pp. 332–334.

<sup>13</sup> Amnon Sela and Yael Yishai, *Israel—the Peaceful Belligerent, 1967–79*, Oxford, 1986, pp. 142–143.

ick Shulamit Allony, partly because she had the temerity to suggest that Golda should be elected as president of Israel, mainly a ceremonial position with little political clout. Golda retaliated and Allony, who was unceremoniously removed from the list, established her own political party called Rats that won three seats in the eighth Knesset. Apart from these additions, Labor did not add any exciting personalities. A similar situation prevailed in other parties as well. The new star of the right was, as mentioned earlier, “Arik” Sharon who was able, within several weeks after joining the Liberal Party, to put together the Likud. None of the parties wanted to add candidates from the academic or even the business communities. They all wanted to play it safe.

Labor focused on stressing what it had done in the past four years in the political, military, economic and social spheres. Its candidates tried to outdo each other in describing the very favorable military situation. Rabin claimed that the new “cease-fire lines provide us with a crushing advantage in the Arab-Israel balance of power. There is no longer need to mobilize our forces each time there are threats or when the enemy concentrates troops along the cease-fire lines... We still live in a situation in which Israel has a considerable military superiority. The Arabs have little capacity to coordinate their military and political activities. So far they have failed in their efforts to turn oil into an effective political weapon in their struggle against Israel”. In order to protect himself, he stated that the “resumption of hostilities is always in the range of the possible, but Israel’s military strength is sufficient to prevent the other side from gaining any military goals.”<sup>14</sup> Allon was carried with his own rhetoric and declared that Egypt possessed no military option. Dayan prophesied that the present military situation would remain at least ten more years. They were all convinced of what they were telling the Israelis and their conviction became stronger after the false alarm of May 1973.

If the Israeli public needed another proof to bolster its feeling that there was not much to worry about, it received it in mid-July when the cabinet decided to accept the IDF recommendation and reduce the length of compulsory military service by three months starting in April 1974. This move was seen as proof that there was no danger of war, at least not in the foreseeable future. Israel was strong enough even with a smaller army to defend its present lines, and the time had come to devote more resources to social issues instead of defense.<sup>15</sup> This was not an “election trick” of the Labor Party, but a move supported by the general

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<sup>14</sup> Ma’ariv, 13 July 1973.

<sup>15</sup> Dayan’s address to the IDF Staff and Command College, Israel Government Press Office Bulletin, 9 August 1973.

staff that wanted a smaller but more efficient, better trained and organized army. The public praised the move and Golda could proudly declare that for the first time in the history of Israel, the government was about to spend more money on social and welfare needs than on defense without being accused of endangering Israel's security. As usual, she accepted the IDF recommendations without asking too many questions. At the end of the day, all her senior military advisers, among them three former chiefs of staff Dayan, Rabin and Bar-Lev, told her repeatedly that the security situation was more than satisfactory. No one wanted to sound jarring notes. Even some among the Labor Party leadership, who at times wondered about the wisdom of their top leaders, did not wish to do so publicly lest they be accused of helping the opposition. Eban was critical, but kept his criticism to general statements in which he said that continued occupation and lack of any political progress was sapping Israel's moral foundations and the quality of life of its citizens. But he kept his criticism low. Sapir opted to keep his views to himself. The brunt of the campaign was carried by the new candidates. A story making the rounds at the time spoke of Rabin telling audiences in Tel Aviv how he strengthened Israel-America ties, while Yariv explained how Israel was winning the war against terror. On the basis of these achievements, they asked the voters to cast their votes for Yehoshua Rabinovic as the next mayor of Tel Aviv.

Israel basked under the blue Mediterranean skies. Tens of thousands of Israelis vacationed abroad. The national mood was good, apart from some unease and restlessness. No one expected dramatic change as a result of the Knesset elections. All the polls indicated an easy victory for the Labor Party and for the team that had led this bloc since 1969. The question was not if Labor would win but how big a majority it would garner. The election campaign failed to ignite the public that treated it with indifference verging on apathy. No party brought an interesting and exciting new message or offered a radical solution and change to the domestic problems, to state-religion relations, to the electoral system and the growing social gap. The new faces that adorned the lists were familiar figures from the IDF and the defense establishment. As usual, glaringly absent from the lists were intellectuals, academics, writers and poets. The Labor Party leaders approached the elections as a hurdle that had to be overcome quickly with no special difficulties. The leadership was relatively calm. The "old lady" would continue to head their list. As far as they were concerned, let her stay at the helm as long as she wanted or could handle it physically and mentally. Maybe the time would come and she would find and anoint a deserving successor who would be acceptable to all. Meanwhile, there was no need to worry.

The prime minister herself reflected the general feeling when she met with the United Nations Secretary General Kurt Waldheim. At the end of August 1973, the Commander of the United Nations forces in the Middle East, the Finnish

General Enzo Siilasvuo, reported to the UN Secretariat in New York of considerable increase in the size of the Egyptian and Syrian forces along the cease-fire lines. He could not be certain if they were just exercising or making preparations for war. Later it was obvious that they did both. Waldheim decided to come to the region in early September and in their meeting, Golda told him that while the situation was not especially rosy, she did not think Israel faced an imminent danger. On the contrary, she disputed his assertion that the Middle East was sitting on a powder keg that was about to explode, she thought that the Arabs would eventually come to accept Israel's existence and peace would come sometime in the future. She disliked Waldheim because of his Nazi past and unfriendly attitude to Israel. She cautioned him not to ring the alarm bells in New York—that would be of no help to anyone.<sup>16</sup>

That summer, the General Headquarters of the Egyptian and Syrian armies continued to ready their forces for war, in the case of Egypt—the crossing of the Suez Canal. Israeli observers who were posted in observation towers on the banks of the Canal were used to seeing the almost daily exercises and reported on them to the IDF General Staff as a matter of routine. On the political front, all waited for the continuation of the negotiations for an interim arrangement in the Canal Zone that would take place in New York during the forthcoming session of the United Nations General Assembly. This time they would be under the personal auspices of the new Secretary of State of the United States, Henry Kissinger. Sadat even announced that he was planning to attend the General Assembly in October, thus alleviating the fears of those who were increasingly concerned that something was wrong. The general assumption was that Egypt would not embark on war while Sadat was in New York. Eban left for the General Assembly with no great expectations that there would be a diplomatic breakthrough. Israel was in fact marking time until the elections.

All this suddenly changed when on September 13, Israeli fighter jets shot down 13 Syrian fighter planes, most of them over Lebanon. The Syrians were trying to interfere with routine Israeli patrol flights over Lebanon. This incident may have reminded some of the incident April 6, 1967, when Israeli planes shot down seven Syrian fighters, some over Damascus. Moshe Dayan feared a Syrian retaliatory operation on the Golan Heights. As tension rose, Dayan demanded in a General Staff meeting on September 24, that the IDF consider this possibility and find the right reply to such an eventuality. The IDF had 70 tanks on the Golan Heights. Dayan told the generals that he would not take any holiday until the end of the Jewish New Year and that the IDF must bolster its defenses on the Golan

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<sup>16</sup> Kurt Waldheim, *In the Eye of the Storm: The Memoirs of Kurt Waldheim*, New York, 1985.

and put in place new early warning means. Golda was informed by him that he was concerned. However, she relied on the judgment of Dayan and Dado and did not contribute much to these discussions.<sup>17</sup>

By then, she was in the midst of preparations for another overseas trip. The Council of Europe had invited her to address its plenary session in Strasbourg in early October. She decided to accept this invitation and she would also indicate her unhappiness with France by flying straight to Strasbourg, not bothering to stop in Paris. She thought that this would be a good opportunity to convey Israel's thinking on the Middle East before hundreds of European politicians. The trip was due to start the day after the Jewish New Year and last three days. On September 24, she asked Dayan if there was any reason why she should not travel in view of what was happening. He said he saw no reason and she told him that in a meeting the next day with King Hussein, she would hear what the monarch knew about the Egyptian and Syrian plans and then she would make up her mind about the trip.

The meeting with Hussein was held in the Mossad guest house north of Tel Aviv at the king's request. He arrived by helicopter from Amman accompanied by his prime minister. Golda was accompanied by Mordechai Gazit and Lou Kadar. The conversation was transmitted live to members of the IDF Intelligence Branch who listened to it with great attention. According to the protocol, Hussein reported that as a result of his meetings two weeks earlier with Sadat and Assad, he felt that both of them had reached a breaking point. They even tried to sound him out if he would be willing to join a war on the eastern front, a request he politely turned down recalling that the last time he did so he lost the West Bank and East Jerusalem. The main subject he raised was the situation in the north.

From a highly sensitive source in Syria, a source that in the past supplied information which we forwarded to others about items connected with plans and preparations, we heard that all the units that were supposed to be in exercises and were readied to participate in such a Syrian plan, were now, for the past two days, in pre-attack positions. There was only a minor change in the plan—division number 3 would also be asked to protect from a possible Israeli pincer attack through Jordan. The alert included their air force, the missiles and everything else that was already on the frontline. All this was done under the guise of exercises, but from intelligence that we had received in the past, these were attack positions and all the units are already placed in these positions. Does this have any significance—no one knows. I have my doubts. It is impossible to be certain. We have to accept these things as facts.

Golda asked: "Is it probable that the Syrians will start something without full cooperation with Egypt?" Hussein replied: "I do not think so. I believe they will

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<sup>17</sup> Bartov, Dado, pp. 289–291; Dayan, Milestones, pp. 570–574.

cooperate". At the conclusion of the meeting, around midnight, Golda consulted with Dayan who told her he was fully aware of the severity of the situation and had ordered reinforcements to the Golan Heights. This conversation failed to ignite a red light, but added to her growing concerns that something was about to happen. Dayan did not think she should change her travel plans. After all, Strasbourg was less than four hours away from Israel.

The next day, September 26, on the eve of New Year, Golda, accompanied by her family and a few close friends, went to the old cemetery in the Tel Aviv suburb of Nachlat Yitzhak, to visit the grave of her sister Sheina on the first anniversary of her death. After placing flowers on her sisters' grave, she turned and walked over and laid flowers on Morris'. From there, she went back to her apartment in Ramat Aviv, and embarked in a discussion with her granddaughter on how valid public opinion polls were. If she was spent and exhausted in the cemetery, she recovered at home. "We shall not let the polls run our lives," she insisted. There were no signs of her meeting with Hussein the night before.

Golda spent Rosh Hashana at home in Ramat Aviv, reading, resting and going over the final version of her speech. She had a second draft. The first she threw out in early August because it dealt with the philosophical meaning of the European unity and the efforts of the Council of Europe to unite the continent after the Second World War. One of her aides who worked on the speech thought something similar could be applied in due course to the Middle East. But she wanted the usual speech focusing on the familiar theme: The Arabs' refusal to recognize Israel and come to terms with its existence. She was prepared to accept a quote from the father of Modern Europe Jean Monnet, who said that peace would come not as a result of contractual agreements, but because of the creation of such conditions that would bring about a change in the lives of nations and people and lead them to take acts in that direction. But this draft was also rejected by her, because of another dramatic event that took place on September 28. Six Palestinian terrorists commandeered a passenger train full of Jewish immigrants making its way from the Soviet Union to Vienna via Czechoslovakia. The hijacking occurred minutes after the train crossed the Czech-Austrian border. They seized hostages and threatened to execute them if the Austrian government did not agree to shut down the Jewish Agency's transit center in Schonau Castle near Vienna that was used as a transit camp for Russian Jews on their way to Israel. The Austrian government headed by Chancellor Bruno Kreisky caved in at once. Israel now feared that this could lead to rethinking in the Soviet Union about the entire policy of emigration of Jews. Israel protested to Kreisky, but he stood his ground. Golda decided to ask for a meeting with him on her way to Strasbourg, but he said he would have time for her only on her way back to Israel. Few had any expectations from the meeting. The relations between Golda and "Kaiser Bruno", as he was affectionally called in

Austria, were never good. He was not one of her favorites. The fact that he was a Jew made things worse. Both were in the leadership of the Socialist International, but Kreisky was not sympathetic to Zionism and was highly critical of Israel's policy in the territories and on the Palestinian issue in general. He supported their claim for a homeland in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.

Golda arrived in Strasbourg on September 30. She was accompanied by Mordechai Gazit, Yisrael Lior and Lou Kadar. The next day, she totally ignored the speech that she had hastily prepared and spoke of the Schonau Affair, the shameful surrender to Arab terror. She was at her best. Speaking without notes, she lashed out at the Palestinian terrorists, at the European appeasers and at the Soviet government that suppressed the Jewish minority on Russia. She was given a standing ovation, but was not overly impressed by the polite applause. Her mind was focused on Schonau and more than that, on worrying reports sent to her by Galili. At the end of September, the IDF Intelligence noted that the rate of Soviet arms shipments to Egypt and Syria had grown considerably. Ammunition was being delivered to both fronts in broad daylight. Golda was now visibly concerned. Prior to her departure, both Dayan and Dado tried to allay her fears by telling her they did not expect a war. On September 26, Dado reported to Dayan that the IDF estimated that Israel was not on the verge of war with Syria. He assumed that the Syrians would not act rashly and attack Israel on their own, and therefore did not recommend that any special preparations be made to avert a war. On September 30, Israeli listeners intercepted information that war was about to break out the next day, October 1. This bit of information was not transmitted to either the chief of staff or to the defense minister by the chief of Military Intelligence, who did not want to alarm them for no reason. He turned out to be right, no war broke out on that day. But Dayan was now restless. On October 1, he told the generals that he was very much concerned about the Golan Heights and that the IDF must find a proper response to the question why the Syrians moved additional tanks to the cease-fire line and bolstered their anti-tank deployment. The next day, Dayan demanded an additional and detailed working paper that would present the difference between the previous Syrian frontline deployment and the present one. Dado was firm: The Egyptians he thought were only conducting exercises along the Canal and it was unlikely that they would attack. He was less certain about the Syrian intentions. Dayan was now openly troubled and asked Galili to tell Golda that he wanted an immediate meeting with her the day after her return from Europe to discuss the new situation.<sup>18</sup>

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**18** Haber, *There will be War Today*, chapter 1; Alex Fishman, "Winds of War", *Ha'aretz*, 2 October 1987; see also "Dayan's Side", *Hadashot*, 2 October 1987, pp. 51–53.

On October 2, Golda packed her bags and flew to Vienna for a meeting with Kreisky. He received her at his office at the Hofburg Palace. She did not waste time on small talk and moved to the matter at hand. She expressed her shock over the decision of the Austrian government to close the Schonau Center and asked for an explanation. Kreisky was put in a defensive position and answered that Austria was the only European country that took upon itself responsibility for the transit of Soviet Jews, thus becoming the target for Arab terrorists. He was ready to share the burden with others, the Dutch for example, and was adamant. The Schonau Center would not be reactivated, he said, and proposed that Soviet Jews arriving by train at the Vienna station would go directly to the airport and fly to Israel at once. Golda said that this might pose a security risk, but failed to move him from his position. Finally he said: “We live in two different worlds”.<sup>19</sup> When the meeting was over, she went to the residence of the Israeli ambassador and complained that Kreisky did not even offer her a glass of water let alone coffee. He later denied this allegation that cast doubt on the traditional Austrian hospitality. When she arrived in Israel, she embraced the Austrian Ambassador to Israel Mrs. Johanna Nestor. In a press conference in the airport, she had to admit that she had failed in her mission. At this point, Schonau was still at the top of her mind, less than the rapidly deteriorating security situation along Israel’s northern and southern borders. It was noted that even if Syria and Egypt were not involved in the hijacking of the train, the timing could not have been better. All of Israel was united in condemning Kreisky and the media lashed out at what it called his cowardice and betrayal of Israel. At the request of the IDF spokesman and the director of Military Intelligence, the Israeli newspapers downplayed the news of the beefing up of the Syrian and Egyptian deployment. Why worry the Israeli people on the eve of Yom Kippur? The military correspondents agreed to the request, thus further dulling the sense of alarm of Israelis who believed that all was well, especially since there was no call-up of reserve soldiers. The mood was eerily calm.

Galili already briefed Golda at the airport and suggested that a meeting to discuss the possibility of war be convened at her office. The meeting took place on Wednesday morning, October 3, at her office in Jerusalem. Dayan, Galili, General Matti Peled, the commander of the Air Force, and senior aides attended. For unknown reasons, Dayan chose to leave Allon out of this meeting. The director of Military Intelligence was sick that day and was represented by the head of the Intelligence Research Division, General Aryeh Shalev. Dayan opened the discussion: “I have asked for this meeting because of the changes on the fronts—mainly the Syrian one, and to some extent the Egyptian one as well. We have intelligence

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<sup>19</sup> Meir, *My Life*, pp. 300–304.



of more arms moving to the Syrian front, and perhaps the Egyptian as well, and of their desire or readiness to resume the war, and I thought I had to bring this to the attention of the prime minister... I thought it right to bring to you our response—what do we do or what can we do”.<sup>20</sup>

General Shalev claimed with much conviction that as for the Egyptians, the reports spoke of exercises and no more. On the basis of intelligence and on the basis of reports that were streaming in in recent days, Egypt estimated that it would not be able to launch a war, thus the probability of a coordinated Syrian-Egyptian attack was low. There had been no change in the Egyptian deployment in the south. The IDF still believed that the Egyptian exercises would end by October 8 as news came that many Egyptian reserve soldiers were told that they would be going home two days later. Shalev therefore assumed that the possibility of a combined Syrian-Egyptian attack was not plausible because there had been no significant change in the Egyptian battle order along the Canal. Golda was not satisfied and asked, “If the Syrians start, what the Egyptians have got now, can they deploy at once for an attack, to give some help to Syria?” She also wanted to know if there was a possibility that the Egyptians would “keep us busy a bit while the Syrians will to do something on the Golan?” Galili supported Dado’s assessment that at this stage, war should not be expected. At the conclusion of the meeting, Shalev promised that if war did break out, they should have a 24-hour alert. Golda was not entirely convinced and asked Dayan,

Let’s assume that the objects are moving and war begins. I accept 100% this concept of differentiating between Syria and Egypt, I think there can be no argument over this. To cross the Canal—the Egyptians could do so and would be farther away from their bases. What will this give them in the end? On the other hand, the situation is totally different with Syria. Even if they want all of the Golan, if they succeed in capturing some settlements, every step they would take beyond the line, if they succeed in holding on to it, it will be theirs.

Neither Golda nor the other civilians present asked a simple question—“let us assume that the intelligence estimates are untenable—what do we do then”? She fully accepted the IDF assessment. Later she wrote in her memoirs: “No one in that meeting saw the need to mobilize the reserves, no one thought the war was about to break”. But she did not add that no one asked what would happen if the Arabs launched a limited war to start a political process.

The head of the Mossad was less hopeful. He was convinced that the Syrians and Egyptians were about to launch a war, but apparently was not too insistent in

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<sup>20</sup> Dayan, *Milestones*, p. 573. For the protocols of the discussion see Golan, *Decision-Making in the Israeli High Command*, pp. 223–337.

his views, while the military men were convinced that not much would happen. The IDF reported to the prime minister that they checked with the CIA and the latter also did not note anything unusual. It was agreed that in the next cabinet meeting, on October 7, there would be a discussion on the situation. Until that time, most of the ministers had no clue as to what was happening beyond the cease-fire lines.

The next day, Thursday October 4, Golda arrived at her office in the government compound in Tel Aviv. In the morning, she held discussions dealing with the forthcoming elections, her own participation in the campaign, and on other domestic subjects. She also received the latest intelligence reports, but even at this stage the picture was not yet complete. In the evening, she addressed an election rally in the Tel Aviv suburb of Givatyim. It was an eerie event. The rally was held in a basketball court. The organizers were unable to draw more than two hundred people, most of them children and youth. Her bodyguard suggested that she delay her arrival until there would be a more respectable crowd. When she entered the court, she was greeted by perfunctory applause. She spoke as usual about Israel's security, how powerful the IDF was so that no one would dare attack Israel. She spoke for 20 minutes. Her words sounded hollow, as if taken from another world. She was visibly tired and distracted. There was no hint in her speech about what was happening along the borders. Part of the speech was an attack on Kreisky. The audience was restless and impatient. When she ended her speech, she rushed back to her home to obtain additional news. This was not her finest election rally. The elections interested her like last year's snowfall. Her senses told her that something was very wrong.

That night, the Russians began to evacuate the families of the thousands of Soviet advisers and technicians from Egypt and Syria. Israel and Washington noted the arrival of giant Soviet transport planes in Cairo and Damascus airports.<sup>21</sup> There was no attempt to conceal the departure of the hundreds of women and children. On Friday morning, October 5, Lior reported to Golda the hasty departure of the Russian civilians. She sat in her office and muttered: "What do they know that we do not?" That morning, she authorized the head of the Mossad Zvi Zamir to travel to London to meet his top agent, the Egyptian Marwan Ashraf whose codename was "Babel". He was Nasser's son-in-law, a highly successful businessman, close to the inner circle around Sadat, who spent much time in London. That morning, another discussion took place in the office of the defense minister. Ely Zeira once again was certain that there would be no war. Following that, a meeting was held in Golda's office in Tel Aviv where the defense minister,

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<sup>21</sup> Haber, *There will be War Today*, chapter 1.

the chief of staff, the director of Military Intelligence and other senior aides updated Golda on the latest news. The head of Military Intelligence still insisted that the probability of an Egyptian-Syrian attack was low, although the Russians (who were then in the midst of evacuating their civilians) might think that the Arabs were about to attack after all. Dado reported on the preparations made for a partial reserve call-up. Golda was also told that Zamir had already left for London to meet his source and that the source claimed that the meeting with Zamir was urgent since something was about to happen. At 1130, she convened a meeting of those ministers who were still in Tel Aviv on the eve of Yom Kippur. Ministers Bar-Lev, Hillel, Hazani, Peres and Galili came. They were joined by Dayan, Dado and Zeira. Conspicuously absent were Sapir and Allon who later expressed their resentment over not being invited. Dayan, Dado and Zeira reported on the situation and for the first time the ministers not in the know heard how grave the situation was. At the end of the discussion, Golda said:

I want to say one word. There is something, there are certain points that repeat themselves from before June 5, 1967. There were some announcements that the IDF was mobilizing its forces on the Golan. Now there is an item in the Egyptian media that the IDF is deployed on the Golan and that the Israeli troop concentrations along the lines are becoming stronger, under a constant aerial umbrella. The Syrian forces are ready to repel any attack. It so much reminds me of what took place at the end of May, early May or the middle of May, until 5 June, and this must tell us something.

She quoted from the Egyptian daily Al-Ahram that there was a danger of hostilities breaking out along the lines at any moment. Her words revealed her feeling that something was radically amiss, that the alert mentioned by the head of Military Intelligence was not a total one and the IDF was really not fully prepared for war. She did not yet propose they call up a large number of the reserves, and neither did Dayan and Dado who felt it was unnecessary at this time. The ministers were told to keep in touch and be prepared to meet even on Yom Kippur if the situation so warranted. This meeting was followed by a meeting of the General Staff where a high alert was declared on all fronts and the forces on Golan were strengthened by additional tanks and artillery.

In the streets of Israel, there were no visible signs of tension. The traffic slowly abated and towards 2 pm almost came to a halt. Zeira stuck to his view that the probability of a Syrian and Egyptian attack was still low. Golda was not assured. She chain-smoked, she was pale. Unusually for her, she even raised her voice. She wanted to know why the Russians left so quickly and what was the IDF doing to bolster the fronts. The IDF did take many precautions. All leaves were cancelled. The Air Force was placed on full alert. The 7<sup>th</sup> Armoured Brigade was moved to the Golan. Alert situation C was proclaimed and the IDF began to call up

some reserves. Emergency stores were opened and readied for possible use. Yet, the IDF continued to pour cold water to calm the tense atmosphere. As he was leaving Golda's office, Ely Zeira put his hand on Lou Kadar's shoulder and said: "Lou, don't worry, there will be no war". Lou may have calmed down as she made her way to Jerusalem. Golda did not. "Something is happening", she kept saying. It had been agreed with Dayan during the meeting that morning that Israel would inform the United States of the events and ask that America would do all it could with the Egyptians and Syrians to prevent an outbreak of war. Mordechai Shalev, Israel's minister plenipotentiary in Washington, and the acting ambassador in the absence of Dinitz who was in Tel Aviv mourning the death of his father, was instructed to seek a meeting with Secretary of State Kissinger. Gazit wrote an urgent cable to the Israel Embassy in Washington and ordered that its contents be transmitted at once to Kissinger who was in New York that weekend for the United Nations General Assembly. The message said that in recent days, there had been increasing evidence that the Egyptian and Syrian military deployment derived from the intention of either to attack Israel or of their fears that Israel would strike first. Golda wanted to assure Kissinger that Israel had no intention to launch a military action against Syria and Egypt. On the contrary, she added, Israel wished to contribute to the reduction of the military tension in the region. She asked Kissinger to inform the Arabs and the Soviets of Israel's decision, all this in an effort to reduce their fears and restore quiet to the region. If, however, Syria and Egypt did intend to attack Israel, they ought to be told in advance that Israel would react strongly with much power. The note also contained the latest IDF intelligence assessment. In this manner, Golda committed Israel not to deliver a preemptive strike. This commitment was given to Kissinger without prior discussion in the cabinet or the Ministerial Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defense. She reached this fateful decision with Dayan. The message was sent late in the afternoon and Shalev did send its contents to the office of the Secretary of State. Woefully, the message reached Kissinger only the next morning after war had broken out. Gazit wondered aloud whether the Russians had not alerted the United States of the Arab intentions. Had not Nixon and Brezhnev agreed to notify each other of any event that could endanger the world's peace?<sup>22</sup> On her way home to Ramat Aviv, Golda paid a condolence call on Dinitz and discussed with him the mounting tension. She suggested that he make preparations to return to his post in Washington the sooner the better, even before the end of the seven days of mourning.

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<sup>22</sup> Henry Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, Boston, 1982, pp. 465–467; Yishai Kordova, *The United States Policy during the Yom Kippur War*, Tel Aviv, 1987, pp. 30–31.

She came home in the late afternoon. The country was making the final preparations for the Yom Kippur fast. Her military secretary Lior came to see her at 4 pm. She told him: “I feel something is not right”.<sup>23</sup> She now focused on waiting to receive the news from the head of the Mossad on the Egyptian plans. She chatted with her family who felt that she was highly agitated. But she refused to expand on what was happening. She could find no rest. She could not read, eat or concentrate. It was obvious to her that something indeed was dreadfully wrong. On the one hand, the IDF was telling her that it had the capacity to deter the enemy and that it had enough tanks and artillery on the frontlines that it could hold the forward positions until the arrival of the reserve forces. But her intuition told her that Israel was moving fast towards war. Her mind told her that there was nothing to worry about. Had not Dado, whose judgment she trusted and whose appointment she championed against Dayan’s candidate, and some of the other generals said they were convinced that nothing would happen and that this alert would also evaporate? The last thing she wanted was a needless large-scale reserve call-up in the midst of an election campaign. The Labor Party would be accused of using the national emergency for political gains. However, if war did breakout and Israel was caught unprepared, the entire edifice of the Labor Party election platform—“we have given you Israelis calm, security, stability, prosperity”—would collapse like a house of cards and with it the party would also fall apart. Whatever happened, the omens were bad, and all this on the eve of Yom Kippur.

She could not sleep that night. If there was war, this would be her war. Unlike 1948 or 1956, there would be no Ben-Gurion. Unlike 1967, there would be no Eshkol. This time, she bore the supreme responsibility and her decisions would affect the life or death of thousands of men and women. This time, there was no higher authority she could consult. She was alone at the top of the tank turret. Late that night, Zamir met his source in London and informed his office that war would break out the next day on two fronts at 6 pm.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Haber, *There will be War Today*, chapter 1.

<sup>24</sup> Uri Bar-Yossef, *The Watchman Fell Asleep*, pp. 330–340. See also Uri Bar-Yossef, *The Angel—Ashraf Marwan, the Mossad and the Yom Kippur Surprise*, Tel Aviv, 2010.

## 18 I Will Never Forgive Myself (1973)

Lior woke her up at 4 am: “Golda, its Israel, war will break out today”. He recalled her simple reaction: “I knew it would happen”. Then she asked: “Israel, what do we do now?” This innocent question said it all. The top echelon of Israel was unprepared emotionally and mentally to the new situation that was about to unfold, although the Egyptian war plans were known to Israel in all their details. But there were no specific scenarios as to what should be done if war indeed erupted and how the senior political and military echelons would act. There was no time for musing. She told Lior that she was getting dressed and would be on her way to the office for a meeting she requested with Dayan. She also asked that Galili would be told to come at once from Na’an and Allon from Ginossar and suggested an early cabinet meeting inspite of that day being Yom Kippur. It was agreed by telephone that Dayan and the chief of staff would come to the Prime Minister’s Office between 0600 and 0630 in the morning. From his office, Lior asked Allon to come at once. Allon decided to drive; the Air Force was unable to provide him with a helicopter because of the alert. Golda reached her office at 0700, went up to the second floor and said to Lior: “It’s war, I have no doubt about it.” When she sat at her table, she asked to know where Dayan and Dado were, had her staff invited the American ambassador Kenneth Keating, and also asked that Bar-Lev would come. She attempted everything in her power to avoid a war and thought she had ten hours to do so.<sup>1</sup> In a General Staff meeting, the idea of a preemptive strike was discussed, but Dayan imposed a veto on this thought, and they moved on to discuss the reserve call-up, mainly how many should be mobilized. Dayan approved, subject to the prime minister’s approval, the total call-up of the air force, a full division in the north and one in the south. Zeira still thought that there would be no war.

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<sup>1</sup> This chapter is based on Bartov, Dado, Vol. II; Dayan, Milestones, pp. 575–678; Meir, My Life, pp. 305–319; Henry Kissinger, Crisis (Hebrew Version), Tel Aviv, 2004; Henry Kissinger, Years of Upheaval, pp. 450–613; Eban, Autobiography, pp. 485–542; Golan, Decision-Making in the Israeli High Command; Haber, There will be War Today, chapter 1; Medzini, Documents, Vol. II, pp. 1023–1081; Herzog, War of Atonement; Saad el-Shazly, The Crossing of the Canal, Tel Aviv, 1987; Blum and Chefetz, The Shepherd; Gai, Bar-Lev; Avraham Adan, On the Banks of the Suez Canal, Tel Aviv, 1979; Shlomo Nakdimon, Low Probability: The Drama Preceding the Yom Kippur War and its Consequence, Tel Aviv, 1982; see also Ronen Bergman and Gil Meltzer, The Yom Kippur War: Real Time, Tel Aviv, 2003; Yaacov Bar-Siman-Tov and Chaim Ufaz, eds., The Yom Kippur War—A New Perspective, Jerusalem, 1999; Yoel Ben-Porat, Closure, The Story of the Yom Kippur Surprise, Tel Aviv, 1991; Aryeh Bar-On, Moshe Dayan in the Yom Kippur War, Tel Aviv, 1992; Hasanain Haikal, The Road to Ramadan, London, 1975, and Avi Shlaim, The Iron Wall, Israel and the Arab World, London, 2000.

In Golda's small office, a meeting started at 0805 with Dayan, Dado, Bar-Lev, Gazit, Zeira, Dayan's senior aide Yehoshua Raviv, Avner Shalev, Dado's aide de camp, Yisrael Lior and Ely Mizrachi. Allon arrived towards the end of the meeting. Dayan explained the situation calmly and proposed that 30 children should be evacuated from Golan Heights kibbutzim, but only towards evening, under the assumption that the fighting would start at 6 pm. Golda demanded the immediate evacuation of the children. She said she had asked to establish contact with the United States government and inform the Americans about what the Israelis knew. This was followed by a discussion on the dimensions of the call-up. Dayan wanted the mobilization of two divisions while Dado suggested four. Dayan feared that a call-up of some 70,000 soldiers even before one shot was fired would be seen in the world as though Israel fired the first shot so it would be considered the aggressor. He relied on the Israeli concept, namely that if war broke out, it would start in lines that were convenient for Israel—on the Golan Heights and the Suez Canal, far from the Israeli heartland. Dado explained that while the IDF was deployed mainly with regular army units and that reserves had not yet been mobilized, he proposed an immediate call-up of 200,000 so as not to lose time and be ready for an Israeli counteroffensive the next day. He saw little difference between a call-up of 70,000 and 200,000 and thought a large call-up could have a deterrent effect on the enemy.

Another subject discussed at this meeting was the preemptive strike. Golda argued that this should not take place because that would mean that Israel was taking responsibility for the beginning of the war. Her aides were certain that she would not approve a preemptive strike by the Israel Air Force on missile sites in Syria, as suggested by the chief of staff. Her senses told her that no one would believe that Israel was not the one to start the war. In her memoirs, she wrote two years later: "Dado", I said, "I know all the arguments in favor of a preemptive strike, but I am against it. We don't know now, any of us, what the future will hold, but there is always the possibility that we will need help, and if we strike first, we will get nothing from anyone. I would like to say yes because I know what it would mean, but with a heavy heart I am going to say no". She did not mention the fact that a day earlier, she had made a commitment to Kissinger that Israel would not launch a war. There was another reason for her attitude. Since 1967, Israel claimed that the new lines created after the Six Days War would prevent another war and that they were very convenient for Israel. If Israel sat on convenient lines, why should it strike first and undermine the Israeli argument in favor of lines that differed from those of June 5, 1967, and the need for defensible borders as a protection from war?

At 9 am the leadership met again to discuss the mobilization and Golda decided to accept Dado's proposal to mobilize four divisions and auxiliary forces,

all together some 120,000 soldiers instead of his original idea of 200,000, twice the number Dayan suggested. Her feeling was “if war breaks out, it’s preferable that the whole world will be angry with us but we shall be a in the best position”.<sup>2</sup> In those tense hours, there was not yet an absolute certainty that war would indeed break out. Some hope prevailed that the Americans would somehow be able to persuade the Arabs to call off their attack. Golda’s considerations were found to be correct later on by the Agranat Commission of Inquiry that studied the events of that day and by most researchers. Later on, she repeated many times: “Apart from me they were all men, used to military affairs, but no one thought differently. In these deliberations, no one stood up and said may be we should mobilize, and I, the civilian who did not exactly know what a division was, had to make a decision, this tortures me to this very day”.<sup>3</sup> It was one of the few times in her long career that she used the argument of being the only woman among all those military experts. After all, she may have thought, in the discussions were the former chief of staff of the Hagannah—Galili, one of the glorious commanders of the War of Independence—Allon, three former chiefs of staff (Dayan, Bar-Lev and Tsur), the present chief of staff, all of them great military experts. It was regrettable that after five years in office, she was still not that familiar with the IDF, since she relied heavily on Dayan and the generals. But she learned fast and during the war astounded her staff when she made very cogent suggestions.

The discussion was over at 0925. The American ambassador was already waiting. Earlier, she had made the necessary arrangements for Dinitz to fly back to Washington at once. He left that morning in a small executive plane that took off from Israel to bring back Mossad chief Zamir. In her meeting with Keating which started with the words, “I am afraid we are in trouble”, she made it clear that Israel would not deal a preventive strike, explained to him the magnitude of the call-up and asked that the United States warn Egypt and Syria not to embark on war. Keating reported to Kissinger, who told him to warn Israel not to start a war. Similar warning was also given to Israel’s Foreign Minister Eban in New York.<sup>4</sup> Golda then invited the head of the opposition Menachem Begin to her office to brief him, and went into the cabinet room next to her office for a cabinet meeting that started at noon. The ministers, apart from those who were in the know since Friday, were in total shock. Most of them never imagined that the situation was so grave and now they were requested to approve decisions that could cost lives, simply on the basis of reports by Golda, Dayan and Dado, under an impossible timetable. The feeling was that Israel still had six hours before the

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<sup>2</sup> Bartov, Dado, pp. 9–25.

<sup>3</sup> Interview in Yedioth Achronot, 19 July 1974.

<sup>4</sup> Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, p. 454.



war would start. She told the cabinet of her decision not to deal a preemptive blow, and a discussion ensued among the ministers on various options. It was mostly academic and focused on “what are we going to do if...” In the course of the discussion, a secretary walked in and gave Golda a note. The Syrians and the Egyptians had opened fire at 1355. Her reaction was in Yiddish: “Nur dos felt mir oys” (That’s all I need). This was followed by English: “They will pay for this”. The Egyptians and Syrians opened with a massive artillery barrage on both fronts four hours earlier than expected. Sirens wailed throughout Israel, on the holiest day of the year. Israelis ran home from synagogue to turn on the radio and heard an IDF spokesman announcement to the effect that the IDF was moving to repel the Egyptian and Syrian armies that had launched a well-coordinated attack on both fronts. This was followed by a list of the code names of the units that were being called up. The call-up was now public. In the morning, men had already been pulled out of synagogues and homes. Some of the ministers recalled what Dayan had said in a discussion on October 3: “If war breaks out, let there be war”. Golda did not understand the reason for the sirens. The cabinet stenographer confirmed that war had started.

Golda rushed back to her office and began to receive a stream of news from the frontlines, while Galili sat down and wrote her radio statement due to be broadcast at 6 pm and on television at the end of Yom Kippur. Her spokesman insisted that she tape both messages to avoid a repetition of the infamous Eshkol statement in May 1967. Galili wrote and she read out to a stunned nation:

Our enemies hoped to surprise us...our assailants thought that on Yom Kippur we would not be ready to fight back. We were not surprised, for several days the Israel intelligence services heard that the armies of Egypt and Syria were deploying for a combined attack. IDF patrols discovered that near the Suez Canal and on the Golan Heights large forces were concentrated in an attack mode. The finding of these patrols confirmed the intelligence.

Our forces were deployed as necessary against this danger... in time we brought to the attention of friendly factors the news of the plan to launch an attack on Israel...we have no doubt we shall win. But we are also convinced that the resumption of aggression by the Syrians and Egyptians is an act of madness. We have done all we could to prevent the outbreak of war.<sup>5</sup>

The television studio was half a mile from her office. Driving there, she could already see the hectic bustle of people loading equipment, absorbing reserve soldiers, vehicles moving, phones ringing, traffic jams, and above all—the shock. At this time, no one had known the magnitude of the achievements of the Syrians and Egyptians and the assumption was that within two days the wheel would

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<sup>5</sup> Prime Minister statement, Government Press Office Bulletin, 6 October 1973.

roll back, the reservists would come to the frontlines, Israel's enemies would be repelled. Most Israelis thought in terms of a quick war similar to the one that was fought scant six years earlier. That was also the prevailing assumption in Washington.

Both in Israel and in the United States the estimates were that the Arabs would not dare to attack because of their military inferiority. In his memoirs, Kissinger wrote that few thought that the Arabs would undertake what seemed to be a highly illogical move and embark on a war knowing they had no chance of winning it, only to restore their national honor.<sup>6</sup> The Israeli and American intelligence communities seemed to have deluded each other and themselves into thinking that nothing would happen. The United States always suspected Israel's exaggerated assessments as an excuse to demand huge amounts of weapons, and thus Washington was careful not to take every Israeli alarm at face value. Washington may have assumed that the Soviets would honor their commitment to inform the Americans of preparations for another Arab-Israel war. Later it was confirmed that the Russians had known about the Arab preparations from high-level meetings they had with the leaders of Egypt and Syria. The pace of supplying the Syrians and Egyptians had intensified. Assad had told the Russians on October 4 the exact time of the attack, and that led them to evacuate the families of their technicians. The Arabs were highly successful in deceiving not only Israel but the United States as well, this time with Russian connivance. Even Kissinger fell into this trap. Arab diplomats were not informed of the impending attack and could innocently tell Kissinger that they were seriously preparing for the Proximity Talks to negotiate the interim arrangement scheme in the Canal Zone. The Egyptian foreign minister discussed this with Kissinger on Friday, October 5, and they agreed that the talks would be resumed after the elections in Israel.

Back in her office, Golda received the early reports that indicated a major Israeli setback. By nightfall, Israel had lost 49 dead and 110 wounded. A number of planes were lost over the Canal, shot down by the missiles that the Egyptians had advanced on August 7, 1970, in violation of the cease-fire agreement. The cabinet met again at 2200 and heard a relatively optimistic report from the chief of staff based on the absence of detailed information from the frontlines. He also reported on the mobilization and the movement of the reservists toward the frontlines. The cabinet was told to expect improvement tomorrow.<sup>7</sup> He did not hide from the ministers the fact that there was much battle fog and that the IDF was doing its best in an untenable situation. Dayan was less optimistic and started to

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<sup>6</sup> Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, p. 465.

<sup>7</sup> Bartov, *Dado*, p. 46.

talk of the possibility of war deep in the Sinai Peninsula and the need to redeploy in a rear line. Golda was torn between the two assessments—that of Dado who wanted to cheer her up and that of Dayan who was probably more realistic and wanted to make sure that there would be no illusions about an early smashing victory like in the Six Days War.

She spent the night in her office, resting on a small sofa and being briefed every ten minutes. Her senses told her that something terrible was taking place. She was right. The Egyptians and Syrians managed to surprise Israel and catch it unprepared. In the course of the night, the Egyptians continued to pour their forces across the Canal and the Syrians were able to break through the Golan Heights forward lines. Few of Israel's leaders slept that night. The entire "concept" collapsed within a few hours. Israel had been caught by surprise not so much by the attack itself—a possibility that had been taken into account—but by the fact that it was caught unprepared and that it never imagined that the Arabs would possess the daring to do what they did. The theory of the surprise prevailed after the war to justify the lack of preparedness. The main fault was not the absence of a preemptive strike or the late call-up but by the fact that the forces that were supposed to be deployed along the Suez Canal and block the Egyptians until the arrival of the reservists were either not there, or were totally unprepared. Golda believed in all her heart that the IDF was a superior army and trusted the judgment of its commanders. She fully believed in what she had heard several times, including in April and May, that there would be ample time for an early alert, the regular army would consist of such a force that it would be able to stem the enemy and that the IDF would then need two to three additional days to annihilate the enemy. The real surprise was that the 320 tanks that were supposed to be in the Canal Zone were not there and that some of them were in disrepair and not ready for war and the small number of tanks that were in Sinai were not enough to stop the Egyptians from crossing the Canal and advancing into Sinai. Golda wondered if the planning was correct. That night it turned out that the assessments that stood at the foundation of the planning did not stand the test of reality. The Syrians and Egyptians decided to launch a war knowing fully well that they would eventually suffer a military defeat, but they would also achieve a political gain by breaking the status quo and forcing the superpowers to act quickly to shake up the conflict from the deep freeze it had sunk into since 1967. Golda had envisioned such a possibility but had not prepared accordingly. Most Israelis still held the Arab armies in utter contempt. That night she underwent a dramatic change of thinking. She began to appreciate the power of the Arabs and to take them far more seriously. After all, they managed within less than ten hours to create a dramatic change in Israel's strategic position. It was obvious to her that the status quo could not be restored. Now she would have to live and act under

the impact of the new developments, at this stage all of them highly negative for Israel. In those horrible hours she did not yet think about what would happen after the war. The one who did was Kissinger, when he told General Alexander Haig, his former deputy at the National Security Council and now Nixon's chief of staff at the White House, that after they stopped the war, they must use this opportunity as a tool to start the diplomatic process.<sup>8</sup>

There is no evidence that Kissinger reported to either Golda or to Eban the contents of a message that he received from Hafez Ismail on the first day of the war, in which the Egyptian diplomat delivered a message from Sadat enumerating the Egyptian demands for a cease-fire that included first and foremost an Israeli withdrawal to the 1967 lines. Kissinger was pleased that the direct channel between him and Egypt remained open and saw in this message an Egyptian invitation to America to become involved. Sadat wrote to Kissinger that "we have no intention to expand the battle or broaden the confrontation". Kissinger, who many years later published the contents of his telephone conversations during the war in a book called "Crisis", understood that this time Egypt would conduct a limited war and this time, unlike 1967, it would not blame the United States for being on the side of Israel. If this piece of information had been transmitted to Israel, surely it would have changed the Israeli assessments, especially those of Dayan who was gloomy and pessimistic from the first hours of the war. The Israeli leaders operated under the assumption that the Syrians and Egyptians would embark on a comprehensive war that would include not only the Golan Heights and the Sinai, but deep into the population centers in Israel. Soon Israel realized that the Syrians and the Egyptians did not despatch their fighter bombers to attack urban centers deep inside Israel, partly because they feared the Israeli Air Force, but also because Sadat did not want to expand the war.

Limited war or not, the next two days would be the most difficult of that war. Golda started the first day of the war, October 7, in a visit to the "Pit". She was accompanied by Allon and Galili. It was already apparent to her that she was going to conduct the war with a small group of people, a war cabinet, consisting of Allon, Dayan, Galili and Dado. Of the four, Allon was slightly more objective. He was never happy with the "Concept" and openly wondered if it would stand a real test. Golda and Galili adopted the "Concept". This informal body that also included some senior officials such as Lior and Gazit was made up of people who shared something in common: they disliked Dayan intensely, each one for his own reasons. The only one who was still prepared to give Dayan some credit was Golda. All of them liked Dado very much. After the war, Golda said: "Truly,

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<sup>8</sup> Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, p. 468.

I learned to love him, as though he was my own son". To her he represented that type of Israeli youth that had no ulterior motives..."if I can say one sentence about him, something that was ingrained in his personality—he was the collective youth that saved us".<sup>9</sup>

In the course of her visit to the "Pit", Dado reported to her on the advance of the Syrians on the Golan Heights and about the orders he issued to the IDF to plan a rear line there and in Sinai in view of the achievements of the Egyptians who moved large forces and tanks across the Canal. At 1000, there was another cabinet meeting where Dado again reported. He tried to be more optimistic and attempted to cheer the ministers who were still traumatized by the news that the Bar-Lev line had collapsed, that there were many casualties and a large number of planes lost during the first day. The Egyptians and the Syrians had displayed a much better fighting ability than anticipated by the experts. Dado promised that by evening there would be a positive change. The ministers and Golda were fully aware of the possibility that having had initial successes, the Arabs would now turn to the United Nations Security Council and demand an immediate cease-fire in place. That would mean they would retain their initial territorial gains. This meant that the IDF had to move at once from the stage of blocking the enemy to a counter offensive to remove the Egyptians from Sinai and the Syrians from the Golan Heights. Golda was visibly restless when a discussion began in her office at 1500, it would prove to be critical for the continuation of the war. In addition to Dayan, Allon, Galili, Gazit, the Cabinet Secretary and some aides were also present. Notes were taken by Ely Mizrahi. Dayan proposed a new redeployment of the IDF along a line 35 kilometers east of the Canal, which meant that he already considered the Bar-Lev line as lost. He pointed to a map in the room and said that Israel could be defended from that line. For the time being, he reached the conclusion that he did not know how the Arabs could be deterred. Golda was alarmed. She did not think that the Arabs had limited objectives and said, "now after they dared...there is no reason why they would not want to conquer Israel".<sup>10</sup> Dayan's words earlier in discussion at Golda's office and later with Dado, in which he hinted of the possibility of the destruction of the Third Temple, astounded those who heard them. He was pessimistic and openly depressed. At one point, Golda left her office and told Lou Kadar: "Dayan wants to talk about terms of surrender". She misunderstood what he meant. He actually thought that the IDF should be redeployed along a new line, easier to defend. Perhaps Lou Kadar failed to understand what Golda meant. From that chance remark, the story began to make the

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<sup>9</sup> Bartov, Dado, p. 53.

<sup>10</sup> Shlomo Nakdimon, Yedioth Achronot, 24 September 1985.

rounds that Golda was thinking of suicide, using the Yiddish term “*ich shtarb avec*”. Golda was not the type to consider, let alone commit suicide. Her autobiography indicated exactly the opposite. It is far-fetched to assume that she would have committed suicide even if both fronts had collapsed. But on that day, there was no evidence that this was going to happen. Galili later claimed that on that dreadful day, “when Dayan described the situation, she may have entertained the idea if that is the situation, how shall we live from now on? To tell you that the war for us, and especially for Golda as a mother, was not a matter of strategic manipulations, but a stirring human experience every hour.”<sup>11</sup> Dayan would later say that his advice to withdraw to a deeper line was only a “ministerial suggestion”. He did not shirk his responsibility but did not want to be the sole leader to be held responsible for what happened. At this stage, Dayan did not yet see how the IDF could launch a counteroffensive.

Before reaching a decision on Dayan’s proposal, the other participants decided to seek another opinion. Galili and Lior suggested that Dado be invited. Dayan agreed and Golda confirmed. Galili went to the “Pit” to fetch Dado who reported to them that the IDF was holding, the reserve forces were on their way, on the Golan Heights the Syrians seemed to have been effectively stopped and there was a good likelihood that a counteroffensive in the Canal Zone would be successful. His proposal that the IDF undertake an offensive on October 8 was approved by the war cabinet. Galili later told one of his aides that as the meeting was about to break up, Dayan leaned back from the door and said off hand that they might have to use special means, which was understood to mean the need to arm some weapons with nuclear warheads. Golda looked at him and said tersely: “Forget it”. The entire idea was at once shelved. Later Dayan went back to Golda and suggested that he should resign. She refused even to discuss it. She was not ready for a government crisis on the second day of what looked like a very bloody war. It would mean an admission of guilt and would further shock the nation. There would also be the need to find a successor. The public was not yet fully aware of what happened because not a single person in authority bothered to inform the Israelis of the true situation. If Dayan resigned, it would indicate that something dreadful was taking place, and she wanted to prevent this at all costs. She may have feared that after he resigned, he would lay the blame on others, chiefly on the IDF, and she wanted to prevent that, too. It is likely that Dayan offered his resignation for the “sake of good order”. knowing that Golda would reject it out of hand. But the main outcome was that while he continued to be defense minister, his ideas would no longer be treated as holy writ unchallenged, and that Dado

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<sup>11</sup> Bartov, Dado, p. 69; Ben-Porat, *Conversations*, p. 125.

would be the central figure in running the war, at least in the eyes of the inner war cabinet. Five years later, Golda admitted: “If there was a hero in that war—it was Dado. All the decisions were so grave and not easy. We took them, and there is no doubt that they were the right ones. And I say that luckily, I was not among those who opposed Dado”.<sup>12</sup> A new situation was created. The defense minister, the hero of 1956 and 1967, was no longer the dominant personality when it came to defense matters, some of his authority devolved on the chief of staff, and part on the war cabinet. Because of this development, Golda had to make decisions on pure military matters and it turned out that she was fully capable of doing so. Dayan himself later wrote about her leadership:

Most likely the prime minister did not get a moment’s sleep that night (not to mention cigarettes and coffee), but I cannot imagine to myself a more open ear, open head and stout heart than with Golda during that meeting. Two days earlier, when I told her that we could not return to the Canal, she had a terrible shock. This morning, too, she did not get satisfaction from me, neither from the information nor from the program. Also I am not sure she agreed with all my views. But there was someone to talk to. I told her the order I gave to the North—no withdrawal at all cost—meaning there could be heavy casualties to our forces. Golda nodded her head in agreement. I have known Golda for many years and I have seen her shed tears more than once, but not during the war. War is not a matter for tears.<sup>13</sup>

During the cabinet meeting that day, Golda had to confront much criticism from ministers who wondered how the intelligence could have been so wrong. Golda replied: “It may well be that long hours before the war we would not know it would break out. Perhaps it was the natural thing that we shall not know. By sheer incident, a miracle, we received the news. This source could also have not come to us. In a hundred years it may be possible to say that we knew and how fantastic it was that we did get this alert”.<sup>14</sup> She asked that the criticism not be leaked out. During a war there was no room to settle personal and political accounts, lest it hurt the morale of the soldiers.

On that day, she made another major decision aimed at obtaining other goals. On the first day of the war, she asked Eban to remain in New York and deal with the United Nations front that he knew so well. Therefore, she acted during the war not only as prime minister but also as foreign minister. She sent a personal note to Kissinger saying that “while the estimates of our experts, and I fully trust these assessments since they never deluded themselves or the cabinet, are that we are in the midst of a heavy fighting, once the reserves and the equipment arrive,

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<sup>12</sup> Interview with Golda Meir, 1978, in the Golda Meir Association.

<sup>13</sup> Dayan, *Milestones*, p. 609.

<sup>14</sup> Nakdimon, *Yedioth Achronot*, 24 September 1985.

the tide of war will turn in our favor". She reminded Kissinger about the reason for Israel to refrain from a preemptive strike and stressed that this decision was the cause for the present situation. Had she authorized the chief of staff to strike, which he recommended, several hours before the Arab attack, there is no doubt that the situation would have been different.<sup>15</sup> She requested that the United States delay a possible vote in the Security Council on a cease-fire at least until October 10 or 11 and wrote that she would not have asked this unless she was convinced that the situation would improve in the coming days. She also asked for American weapons, specifically "Sidewinder" missiles. Kissinger estimated that Israel's request should be acceded to, because if the Arabs won, they would be unbearable and there would be no negotiations.<sup>16</sup>

Two other developments marked that day. The Russians proposed to the United States to bring about an end to the war and to impose on the parties a comprehensive agreement. When Hafez Ismail sent his message to Kissinger on the first day of the war proposing to end the war if Israel agreed to withdraw from all the territories it occupied in 1967, this, suggested the Egyptians, would be followed by the convening of an international conference to discuss various items including freedom of navigation. Egypt refused to return to interim arrangements or partial settlements. The fact that Egypt turned directly to the United States aroused a great deal of interest with Kissinger. Here was the opportunity America was seeking to play a meaningful role in ending the war and mainly in the postwar diplomacy. Now Washington faced a hard dilemma. It had a moral commitment to stand by Israel at her most difficult hours, but she did not want to return to the status quo that prevailed before October 6. America now wanted to use the war as a tool to move towards a process that would lead to the resolution of the conflict. Kissinger knew that Israel would not talk to the Arabs until it was able to stop their attack and gain some impressive military achievements. He also realized that the Arabs would not talk to Israel unless they felt that they had restored their national honor and shown to their people that they had achieved some impressive military gains. Hence it was important that no side be made to feel that it had won a total victory in this war, so that none of them would see the postwar diplomacy as a means of imposing a settlement due to failure in the war.

On that day, Golda approved the mobilization of Haim Bar-Lev and he was initially sent to the northern front to assess developments there, after which he assumed responsibility for the southern command, an arena that turned out to be highly problematic because of the military situation as well as many personality

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<sup>15</sup> Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, p. 477.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 479.



problems among the commanders. That evening, Dinitz returned to Washington and established contact with Kissinger. Everyone was tensely waiting to see whether the counter offensive, due to take place on October 8, would turn the tide. Golda went home for several hours of rest. On that day, she instructed her spokesman that she would grant no interviews during the war. At the right time, she would hold a press conference for the local and foreign media. Her decision derived from her fear that she would be asked highly embarrassing questions on why Israel was found unprepared, why the IDF was unprepared and why there had been what later became known in Hebrew as the *mechdal*—sin of omission. Her decision was correct in political terms, but this way, Golda did not utilize her strongest weapon during the war—her ability to persuade and convince others of Israel's case. She shut herself in her office, consulted with a few key advisers, most of whom bore the responsibility for what happened together with Golda. Her spokesman argued in vain that she was abandoning this critical arena to others, and that the public wanted to be told what went wrong and above all wanted to be reassured by the highest authority that all would be well. But she was adamant—there would be no interviews. During the war, she ventured out of her office to visit IDF wounded in hospitals and once to meet American airmen who flew the airlift to Israel.

Monday, October 8, was due to be the turning point of the war. At 0950, the war cabinet met in her office. Dado was convinced that the battle on the Golan Heights to stop the Syrians would be over and that the IDF would begin to push the invading Syrians back to the old cease-fire line (the purple line). To raise morale, Galili proposed that the Golan settlements residents who were evacuated on the first day of the war would be allowed to return to their homes. The participants then moved to the cabinet room where the chief of staff told them that the Syrians were being driven back and that the IDF expected a major change on the southern front as well. It was obvious to the ministers that a meaningful military achievement could delay a UN Security Council meeting or at least influence its outcome. In the course of the day, encouraging news indicated that some IDF units were moving back towards the Canal. At one point, there was much excitement in Golda's office when news came that a number of Israeli tanks had reached the waterline. But the excitement was premature. By evening it became obvious that the counteroffensive had failed at the cost of scores of dead and injured in addition to a large number of tanks that were hit and taken out of action.

Before the magnitude of the failure became evident, the chief of staff addressed a press conference and was asked when he thought the fighting would end. His answer was that he envisioned one thing—"that we shall continue to attack and to hit and will break their bones, and I do not want to make a commitment how

long it will take”.<sup>17</sup> The public listened to Dado with much relief, and when the entire cabinet met at 2100, the mood was optimistic. Dayan poured some cold water when he announced that the IDF had not crossed the Canal and that the decisive battle on the Golan Heights would take place only the next day. Dado explained the situation in the south, but it turned out that he did not have the full facts. Only after he went back to the “Pit” did he hear that the counteroffensive had failed. That evening, two problems arose: Should the Israeli public be told of the harsh military reality, to prevent irresponsible rumors that began to circulate, rumors that could harm irrevocably the credibility of the government. And should Israel now tell the United States that Israel had suffered massive number of casualties and loss of equipment and that the war was not developing in its favor at this time. If Israel asked the United States to replenish its depleted stores, would not the United States use this as a leverage to demand political concessions so that Israel would be asked to pay a heavy political price at the end of the war? Dado supported the idea of telling the Americans the full truth, for they would learn about it from their own sources in any case. Golda tended to accept Dado’s views. Her tendency to rely more on Dado became stronger when she heard on October 9 what Dayan had to say in a discussion in the “Pit” at 0430. He stated that while there would be no withdrawal on the Golan Heights, in Sinai the IDF must prepare for the possibility of withdrawal and the construction of a rear line of defense. He also spoke of the possibility of large-scale call-up including youth and the aged to block the possibility of the enemy breaking into the heartland of Israel. Those present were shocked, as was the prime minister. Dayan’s senior aide, former Chief of Staff Zvi Tzur, a highly intelligent and balanced man, later described what took place: “Dado worked in the most difficult conditions. There is no doubt that he led the fighting, that he ran the war. Dayan was somewhat unhinged, and Golda—who held herself in one piece—relied mainly on Dado, on his reporting and on the assurance that at the end of the day we should do the job—it may take another day, but we would do it”.<sup>18</sup> October 9 may have been the worst day of the war. In view of the setback, the collapse of the illusions, the leadership suffered from low morale. It seemed as if Dayan had lost his self-assurance and was even prepared to activate special means against the Syrians. His aides were able to dissuade him from that.

While Dado and Dayan were busy running the war, Golda ran the political struggle. Here she was more at home. She knew this arena well from 1956 and 1967, including the personalities involved. She had direct links to the White

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<sup>17</sup> Bartov, Dado, p. 108.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 117.

House and the Department of State, to Congress and to other influential personalities, including the Jewish leadership. Golda was represented in Washington by Ambassador Dinitz, who had already gained a good reputation as an able diplomat. Her key foreign policy advisers were Galili, Allon and Gazit, who formulated most of the correspondence with the Nixon administration. Eban stayed in New York and was rarely consulted. He was kept informed by the director general of the Foreign Ministry who had an office one floor below Golda's. On October 7 and 8, Dinitz gave Kissinger a somewhat rosy assessment regarding the situation on the basis of information received from Golda's office by phone and by cables. On October 8, it became evident that the Security Council that met in New York at this stage had no intention, to adopt any resolution dealing with cease-fire since the Soviets were not that keen on it at the time. But the possibility that Israel would push back the Syrians and the Egyptians beyond the purple line on the Golan Heights and back across the Suez Canal, alarmed both Kissinger and the Russians, each for their own reasons. Kissinger feared that if the Arabs lost, there would be an explosion in the Arab world that would trigger an embargo on the exports of oil to Western countries and Japan. The Soviets feared another humiliating defeat of their clients and another blow to their modern weapons. In spite of Dinitz's reports that the situation was improving, he even raised some thoughts regarding Israel's demands—all the forces would go back to the starting line and there would be a prisoners' exchange. That led Kissinger and Nixon to fear that Israel could win, and in that case the Arab world would go up in flames ending any chance for future diplomatic moves.<sup>19</sup> Israel's leaders were unaware of this, although some may have guessed that this possibility existed. At this stage, they had to assure a crushing military victory and punish the Arabs for their temerity. The Knesset elections, although postponed for the duration of the war and eventually held at the end of December, were at the back of the minds of many politicians. A defeat in the war could mean loss in the elections, although no one dared speak about this openly.

On Tuesday, October 9, Golda decided to ask for American military aid, mostly tanks and airplanes. Dinitz woke Kissinger at the crack of dawn and they met early that morning in Kissinger's office at the White House. The meeting was also attended by Israel's Military Attaché to Washington General Mordechai Gur and Kissinger's senior aides Scowcroft and Rodman. Dinitz told the Americans that Israel's losses in planes amounted to 49 (16 of which were "Phantoms"), that 600 tanks were out of commission, 500 of them on the Egyptian front. Israel needed replenishment at once. The previous day's rosy

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<sup>19</sup> Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, p. 490.

picture was forgotten. Dinitz informed Kissinger that Golda had instructed him to seek a personal meeting with the president in order for her to explain to him the severity of the situation and to elaborate on the extent of the Soviet air and sea lifts that were already taking place. Golda's trip to America could not be kept secret. It would cause a major uproar, would be seen as panic in Israel and could encourage those Arab states who had stayed out of the war to join it, chief among them Jordan. Such a visit could also intensify the pressure by the American Jewish community on the administration to speed up the arms shipments, thereby eliminating the chances that the United States could be seen as an effective unbiased mediator. It could also be seen as collusion between Israel and the United States, similar to the 1956 collusion between Israel, Britain and France. Kissinger strongly objected to the idea and the president accepted his position. But, even earlier, with no connection to Golda's request to come to Washington, Nixon reached the conclusion that the United States could not allow Israel to suffer a major defeat on the battlefield. He would help Israel. This decision was transmitted to Dinitz on October 9 in the evening, midnight Israel time. The president approved the dispatch to Israel of planes, electronic equipment and shells, including laser-guided artillery shells. America by then realized that strategically, Israel had lost the war. Nixon informed Golda and promised her that if Israel found itself in a major state of emergency, he would send tanks even by air. On that day, few in Israel thought it was necessary to activate the emergency clause mentioned by Nixon which meant an airlift. The assumption in Tel Aviv was that the United States would not want to risk its position in the Arab world, including vast economic interests. There remained the question if and when the Americans would send the arms, how that would be done. On October 10, both the Israeli and American intelligence confirmed that the Russians began to move huge amounts of supplies to Syria and Egypt by air and by sea. Nixon may have feared that this would give the Russians a stronger hand when negotiations took place to end the war and to start the postwar diplomacy. He did not want to grant them the position of those who would dictate the terms of an arrangement and approved American arms shipments so that the United States could play a meaningful role in the coming diplomatic moves. He may have also feared that if pushed to the wall, Israel could consider using nuclear weapons out of despair. The president reached his decision with no connection to real or imaginary pressure by the American Jewish leadership. Golda responded by cabling Nixon: "we are convinced we shall win. When we do, we shall remember you".<sup>20</sup>

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**20** Mordechai Gazit on the airlift, *The Jerusalem Post*, 9 October 1981.

On October 9, at 0730, the cabinet met at Golda's office with the chief of staff present. The central decision reached was that the Syrian front would be given top priority and after it was stabilized, attention would be paid to the Egyptian front. In that meeting, Dayan informed the ministers that he intended to make a television appearance in order to tell the nation what was happening. Later that afternoon, Dayan briefed the Editors' Committee, something he did every two days during the war, and presented to them a very gloomy picture including his assessment that at some point Israel might have to redeploy along a new line in Sinai. One of the editors described the briefing as "an earthquake". Dayan also told the editors of his plan to address the nation. One of the editors was alarmed, called the prime minister and urged her to prevent Dayan from appearing in order not to harm national morale. She spoke with Dayan and they agreed that the television address would be delivered by General Aharon Yariv, who was mobilized as chief of information.<sup>21</sup> Yariv did manage to find the right formula to explain to the Israelis the fact that while the situation in the north was good, this was not the case in the south. He stated that the war would be a long one and Israelis should not expect immediate military gains. This address worked well to restore some credibility among Israelis that while the war was not developing exactly as expected and there would still be many difficult days, eventually Israel would triumph.

That evening, Golda approved the appointment of Bar-Lev as Commanding Officer Southern Front. Generals Magen, Gonen, Sharon and Adan would now be subordinated to him. That day also included Golda attending a meeting with the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee. The chief of staff said: "without deluding you with optimism and without worrying you about a Holocaust, it is not a Holocaust, but this is a very trying war, and if it extended, it would be harsher".<sup>22</sup> By that day, Israel had sustained 300 dead, 100 missing in action and over 1,000 wounded. The names had not yet been published, but Golda began to hear the names of children and grandchildren of friends who had fallen in action. Each report shocked her. She would cover her face with her hands and ask to be left alone.

By October 10, the Syrian army was expelled from most of the areas it occupied in the course of the war with the exception of Mt. Hermon, and the IDF came to about 60 kilometers from Damascus. However, no such decisive achievement was gained in Sinai. That evening, a long discussion was held at Golda's office with Dayan, Allon, Galili, Dado and generals Tal, Zeira, Zeevi and Yariv and Air

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<sup>21</sup> Bartov, Dado, p. 136.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 162.

Force Commander General Benny Peled. The chief of staff proposed that the IDF act the next day beyond the purple line and bring about a decisive change. Once this was achieved, it would be possible to transfer a large force to Sinai to bring about a decision there. That meant a delay in beefing up Sinai by four days. Meanwhile, the Russians became increasingly alarmed. Brezhnev called Nixon and suggested an immediate cease-fire, effectively freezing the situation on both fronts. Nixon asked for time to consider; Dinitz was informed and transmitted this news to Golda. She asked Nixon to reject the Soviet idea. However, Brezhnev's intervention played a role in the Israeli decision making that evening. Golda concluded the discussion by saying that the offensive on the Golan Heights as proposed by the chief of staff would give Israel some territory beyond the cease-fire lines that could be used as a bargaining chip. If it succeeded, the Syrians might quit the war and that would influence the Jordanians not to enter the war or only to provide some token involvement in the Golan. She understood that at that time it was impossible to obtain a decisive victory in Sinai, even at a very high cost. She did sense that there was a need to act fast. She recalled the War of Independence and the Sinai War when the clock dictated certain military moves. "Israel must win the war, and Kissinger had already told Dinitz that much, if we had the strength to strike a major blow on the Syrians and force them to seek a cease-fire, that would be a huge achievement".<sup>23</sup>

That night, Golda was finally convinced to make a television appearance to the nation. From a makeshift studio in the Journalists House in Tel Aviv, she told the nation that the Golan was back in Israeli hands and its forces were close to the Canal. The aim was to raise the sagging morale of the Israelis on the eve of the holiday of Sukkot and give them some good news. But she also stressed that there should be no illusions—Israelis should not think for a moment that this would be a repetition of the Six Days War. The arrangements in the studio were not good, she looked sad, drawn, with her eyes lowered as if she did not have the courage or the strength to look directly at the audience. The next day, encouragement letters poured in from citizens who wanted to bolster her spirit. She still refused to budge from her office. To her spokesman who suggested that she should make a public appearance at least at a hospital, she said: "Don't you know there is a war going on?"

In the next two days, Golda concentrated all her efforts to hasten the arms supply to Israel. She never did inform the president of the United States that Israel was facing a major emergency. It was he who decided on his own to replenish her stores. Once he made up his mind, she began to bombard Dinitz with

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<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 175.

telephone calls to do all he could to bring about the activation of the airlift. He was instructed to use anyone who could be of help, mainly those whom Kissinger derisively called “Dinitz’s minions”. That meant members of Congress, senators, trade unions, the media, even academia and of course the Jewish leadership. The pressure resulted in Nixon demanding of Kissinger that he should threaten Dinitz that he would see him personally responsible for leaked information that looked as though he held up the arms shipments on purpose.<sup>24</sup> The truth was that the IDF did not see those shipments as a matter of life and death, whose absence would mean that the artillery could no longer fire shells and the armor immobilized. Golda viewed the airlift as a major political act, designed to demonstrate to the Arabs that Israel was not alone in the war. She thought that once the airlift got under way, the United States would not push for an immediate cease-fire. For her, the airlift would also raise morale in Israel by demonstrating to Israelis that they were not alone and the United States was behind them. This would also make sure that for the time being there would be no cease-fire. Now all that remained was to wait patiently for the Israeli soldiers on the Golan Heights to push the Syrians back deep into their territory.

On October 11, at 2030, the war cabinet met once more in her office. Dado reported that the Syrian line had not yet been fully smashed and there was need to move the artillery to such positions that Damascus would be within their range. He also reported that there had been a change on the Egyptian front and the Southern Command was planning a major counter-offensive. A cabinet meeting followed where the chief of staff described the various options available to the IDF and recommended that the IDF cross the Canal and capture a bridgehead on the Egyptian side of the Canal. The ministers were under the impression that Israel had two more days remaining and that the war had been successfully concluded by capturing all the territory lost in the north (Mt. Hermon specifically) and an attempt to cross the Canal, so that if cease-fire were to be declared, it would take place roughly along the starting lines of the war. At this point, Israel had not yet discussed in depth what its war aims were. Basically, there were none—Israel wanted first and foremost to restore the situation that prevailed before the Arab attack. An hour later, the cabinet approved the plans for the next day and asked that prior to the crossing there would be another cabinet meeting to authorize this critical move.<sup>25</sup>

The Prime Minister’s Office settled into a routine. In the room adjacent to Golda’s office sat Lior, Bureau Chief Ely Mizrachi and the secretaries. In a side

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<sup>24</sup> Ben-Porat, *Conversations*, p. 123.

<sup>25</sup> Bartov, *Dado*, p. 175.

room sat Mordechai Gazit. On the first floor there huddled a Foreign Ministry team who were in fact observers and not intimately involved in the diplomatic moves. On the third floor, Galili had an office. The tension was high. All chain-smoked. Golda, who normally smoked two packs a day, reached some 80 to 90 cigarettes. They ate sandwiches and drank black coffee. There was no space for all who had to be there, the noise was unbearable because of phones constantly ringing and the incessant movement of messengers who brought cables from the Israeli embassies, IDF reports as well as intelligence estimates. Occasionally, some important and less important people came to get some news. Most of them had nothing to do there and were insulted for not being involved in the proceedings. Golda sat for hours in her room, most of the time not alone, usually with Galili, Allon, Lou Kadar and Ely Mizrachi who became the official notetaker of sensitive discussions. She did not want to be alone.

It is not clear at what stage she realized that very early after the war there would be calls for holding a serious and thorough inquiry to determine why the IDF had been caught unprepared, why the reserves were not mobilized in time and why the “Concept” turned out to be totally wrong. She may have also felt that the next elections could bring a political earthquake, similar to the military one that occurred on October 6. This meant she had to be very careful in the matter of the inquiry lest she play into the hands of the opposition. Begin did display national responsibility when he avoided open criticism during the war, but obviously he would not remain silent afterwards.

The Yom Kippur War brought out Golda’s best qualities: inner strength, decisiveness, authority. She sat in her office, strong as a rock. Her spokesman told a journalist that she sat there like a statue of Buddha: calm, serene and tough. When it appeared that many others were losing their heads and were close to panic, Galili, who watched her almost hourly during the war, said what many others thought as they watched her functioning during the most difficult hours:

Golda deserves all praise for emerging during the Yom Kippur War as a prime minister and as a human being. She displayed the strength of a warrior whose head is cold and heart warm, the heart of a mother feeling the bereavement of her sons. Her presence in the discussions cast an atmosphere of strength. She never imposed a military move, but her stand enabled the government discussions whose starting point was not wobbly knees, but opportunity and hope for active moves that changed the situation.<sup>26</sup>

After the war, Haim Bar-Lev related that “Golda was not one of those who during the worst hours of the war thought that all was lost, there was no choice but to fold

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<sup>26</sup> Ben-Porat, *Conversations*, p. 124.



up or fight to the last bullet. That derived from her ironclad fundamental belief in our just cause, in our vitality, in our abilities. Then, even at the worst time, she understood that something unexpected had taken place, but she related to it only as a momentary phenomenon, and not as a fundamental flaw. She believed that once we overcame the shock of surprise, things would begin to move in the right direction”.

Her decision not to expose herself to the Israeli public created the feeling among many Israelis that the country was being led by a weak leadership. Few knew that Israel was guided with much common sense and in a balanced manner with a broad understanding of the new national, regional and international reality, by Golda Meir. If Golda did indeed run the country and the war with an assured, steady and experienced hand, this feeling did not seep to the broad population and left it exposed to many rumors. In retrospect, Golda’s attitude to the media and her obsessive desire not to divulge secrets backfired against her and the country at large, specifically at those critical times when the country needed to know that there was a leader who knew what he was doing, like Ben-Gurion in 1948 and Dayan in 1967. Since Golda avoided the media, a feeling was created that she was either unwilling or unable to explain what happened. Her absence contributed to portraying Israel as a weak, rudderless and hesitant country in the midst of what some said was a war for survival (which it never was). Reality was different, but the negative image remained. If Golda had doubts and second thoughts, she never gave them public expression and hardly shared them even with some of her closest aides. She rarely said what she thought of some of the personalities involved. She held long telephone conversations with Dinitz, Dayan and Dado, but tried not to speak directly with Kissinger and trusted Dinitz to do his best, which he did. She refrained from calling the president. She did speak with some of those who had opposed her policies on the eve of the war, to their credit it must be said that they did not lecture her or used the expression “we told you so”. Sapir swallowed his anger and embarked on a fundraising campaign abroad. Eban was in New York most of the time. Golda never sunk into depression (as Begin would during the closing phases of the First War in Lebanon), but she also did not express her joy over victories. She followed closely the growing number of casualties. In the first ten days of fighting, Israel lost over 650 dead. It also had scores of prisoners who fell to the Egyptians and Syrians. The publication of the number stunned the nation. Now the calls for an inquiry intensified as the IDF was informing the families of the death of their loved ones. Among those who openly called for an inquiry were soldiers stationed along the Canal on the day the war broke out. They were joined by reserve soldiers and later by some ministers, Knesset members including Labor Party members. All wanted to know who would be held accountable for what had happened. Golda’s order of

priorities was clear: First we win the war, ensuring that it will not be followed by another War of Attrition, then we must secure the cease-fire arrangements and only then we pose questions.

On Friday, October 12, at 1430, Golda held another crucial meeting in her office. Present were Dayan, Galili, Allon, Dado, Bar-Lev and generals Tal (deputy chief of staff), Zeevi, Zeira, Yariv and Peled in addition to their aides. The head of the Mossad was also present. Dado requested authorization to continue the advance on the Golan Heights and to cross the Canal. Some fear was expressed that two Egyptian armored divisions were about to cross the Canal into Sinai on October 14 and that could jeopardize the IDF crossing plans. Bar-Lev supported the crossing while Tal was opposed. The decision was to postpone the crossing and instead prepare a counter-offensive against the Egyptians forces, and all this under the assumption that there would not be a cease-fire. That evening, an important development took place. The first American giant cargo planes arrived at the Tel Aviv airport and residents could now watch the planes making their way to Israel at the rate of one every twenty minutes. The Americans operated 556 flights and brought 20,000 tons of equipment. Contrary to later claims that the airlift saved Israel from utter defeat, the fact was that the battle on the Golan Heights had already been successfully decided and the Egyptian forces in Sinai were blocked. However, the airlift gave Israel and especially its prime minister a feeling of great relief, it added to Israel's security and ability to maneuver at greater ease. While the equipment was not used that very moment with rare exceptions, Zvi Tsur thought that Israel would need this equipment if the war was extended. Another piece of news that arrived that day spoke of the concentration of three Soviet divisions in Eastern Europe and the possibility that they could be flown to the Middle East. Under the impact of this intelligence, the cabinet met at midnight and resolved that if there became an offer for a cease-fire on the Syrian front, Israel would accept it. The prime minister informed Washington that Israel would be willing to accept a cease-fire on both fronts as long as it would take place in the existing lines. If Israel was asked to withdraw from Syrian territory beyond the purple line, Egypt would be asked to withdraw its forces to the western bank of the Canal.

During the discussions of October 12, the head of the Mossad revealed that he had already received news that the Egyptians were about to cross the Canal with the strength of two armored divisions. This was in accordance to plans that Israel had possessed for over a year. Dado received this news with much relief and said that the IDF could destroy hundreds of Egyptian tanks, thus opening the way for the crossing of the Canal. It was agreed that the IDF would wait for the Egyptian attack, and after annihilating the tanks would cross the Canal. The cabinet agreed that the timing of the crossing would be determined by the entire

cabinet. The ministers felt that such a game-changing decision must not be made by a small group of ministers. Some may have lost total confidence in Golda, Dayan and Galili.

While Israel did not show much interest in a cease-fire, the Egyptians were now pressing for it. They approached Waldheim and he reported to Kissinger their terms for a cease-fire: total Israeli withdrawal to the 1967 lines, Egypt would agree to the stationing of an international force in Sharm el-Sheikh and accept demilitarized zones. An international force would be stationed on the Golan Heights and an international conference to which the Palestinians would be invited would be held to iron out the details. Waldheim told Kissinger that Eban had already rejected the proposal. Essentially, Egypt was now prepared to return to the status quo with the exception that they would remain in the narrow strip of land they occupied on the east bank of the Canal. If Israel had agreed to this idea, it would have given the Egyptians a major achievement, Israel would have been seen as having lost the war and the IDF would no longer have been a deterrent force. Eban and Dinitz did not require detailed instructions from the prime minister to reject the offer.

On Saturday, October 13, the war was a week old, and fighting continued on both fronts. All eyes were on the Egyptian front where the Egyptian attack took place as anticipated, and the IDF was able to destroy some 250 Egyptian tanks. The wheel began to turn full circle. That morning, Dado reported to the war cabinet that the IDF was digging in along a new line 15 kilometers from the purple line in what became known as the Syrian Salinet. This would give Israel an important advantage in future negotiations with the Syrians. Dado also felt that the Egyptians had now exhausted all their capabilities and had already instructed the IDF generals on the southern front to complete their preparations for the crossing of the Canal. That evening, Golda held a press conference for the foreign press in English. She did not have earth-shattering news, but decided anyhow to meet the foreign media, mainly to tell the world how evil the combined Egyptian-Syrian attack on Yom Kippur had been. From there, she went back to a plenary meeting of the cabinet. The chief of staff once again reviewed the latest developments and asked for authorization to cross the Canal. Having heard the IDF considerations including the inherent risks, the cabinet approved the crossing after midnight. 14 ministers voted in favor, Allon abstained and said he would express his views only after he had visited Sinai the next day. Dado decided to launch the crossing on the night of October 14–15.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Bartov, Dado, p. 226.

While Israel was gaining impressive achievements on the battlefield, its international position was quickly eroding. Most of the African nations decided to suspend their diplomatic relations with Israel. Several had done so even before the war, some during the war and several immediately after the cease-fire went into effect. Each cable from an Israeli embassy in Africa announcing the suspension of diplomatic relations was like a dagger in Golda's body. Her main achievement in her ten years as foreign minister now collapsed. The African heads of state did apologize for this ungrateful move. Later they explained that they were blackmailed by the Arabs in the name of "African Solidarity", they had to support a sister African nation—Egypt—fighting to regain its African territory. Some were promised vast sums of money, others were told that they would not get a drop of Arab oil or pay double and triple for it, some were bribed and others claimed that threats were made on their lives. Some may have felt that Israel was about to lose the war, so why should they stay with the losing party? Golda could only reflect on their ingratitude and on the new international reality which proved to be cold and cruel. She had trusted most of Africa's leaders and a number of them she considered as personal friends: Jomo Kenyatta from Kenya, Felix Houphouet-Boigny from the Ivory Coast and Julius Nyrere from Tanzania. Psychologically, this was a major blow to Israel. It worsened when the governments of Western Europe informed the Americans that they were opposed to American planes flying over their territory on their way from bases on the east coast of the United States to Israel. Portugal alone allowed them to refuel in the American air force base in the Azores—a Portuguese territory. Europe did not want to be involved in this war. Britain and France effectively imposed an embargo on the delivery of weapons and spare parts to Israel. While this position angered Golda, it did not surprise her. As she made some snide remarks, she could barely swallow the bitter pill. Israel's diplomatic position in Africa collapsed entirely (ironically with the exception of the Apartheid regime of South Africa) and its position in Europe was on the brink of a precipice. There remained only the United States and that power could not always be relied upon. The Israeli leadership had a hard time guessing what the Americans were about to do, what secret deals they were concocting with the Soviet Union and what was the nature of the ties that were secretly being woven with Egypt, even during the war and even when the Egyptians were fully aware that the United States was now openly supplying Israel with weapons flown on board United States Air Force cargo planes. Israel feared that there would be a heavy price to pay for the airlift. The only ones who could be trusted were the Jewish communities on all continents, who as always mobilized quickly to help the beleaguered Israelis who they thought were fighting for survival. They donated tens of millions of dollars, and thousands of volunteers began to stream to Israel, to them a beleaguered country, although its army was now patiently making the final preparations to cross the Suez Canal.

In a cabinet meeting on October 15, Dado reported that there had been a slight delay. At 0145, the first paratroopers commanded by General Arik Sharon had crossed the Canal and established a bridgehead on Egyptian soil. Dayan phoned Golda at 0600 and told her that the crossing was proceeding well, and that it would give Israel a cutting edge over the Egyptian army.<sup>28</sup> She did not yet heave a sigh of relief. She knew the crossing force was small and had already sustained huge losses. It had to be reinforced at once to prepare for an anticipated Egyptian counterattack. Golda decided that morning to convene the Knesset for a special session to hear an authorized report from the prime minister on the progress of the war. The session would be held in Jerusalem on the afternoon October 16. The Knesset had dissolved itself in July in view of the coming elections. Since the elections had been postponed, the existing Knesset remained as the supreme elected body of Israel. Now the time had come to share with the Knesset the fateful events. On that day, the Egyptian Foreign Minister Mohamed al-Zayat invited Kissinger to visit Cairo. Kissinger understood the significance of the invitation, and it was important to him that Israel would deal a heavy blow to the Egyptians, but it must not be of such magnitude that the Egyptians would refuse to negotiate with Israel, directly or still better through Kissinger, after a cease-fire would go into effect.

On the morning of October 16, Dado reported to Golda that the crossing was proceeding well and that a large bridgehead had already been established. On that day, Sadat addressed the Egyptian People's Council, but said nothing about the Israeli crossing.

The Egyptians were utterly stunned. On the same day, news came that the Soviet Prime Minister Alexei Kosygin had flown unexpectedly to Cairo. The Russians had taken aerial photos and realized the extent of the Israeli penetration in Egypt and feared that the Egyptian army was on the verge of a total collapse. They also knew of the highly problematic situation of the Syrians and had come to the conclusion that the time had come to persuade Sadat to accept a cease-fire before the military situation worsened.

In the afternoon, Golda traveled to Jerusalem, the first time she had been to the capital city since October 3. Her speech, written as usual by Galili, was long and tedious. It described in minute detail the Arab military array on the eve of the war, the course of the war to date and the dimensions of the Soviet supplies to the Arabs. At the end of the statement, there was one revelation that electrified the Israelis: "At this hour, as we meet in the Knesset, an IDF force is operating on the Western side of the Canal", she said cryptically.<sup>29</sup> This statement was not coordi-

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<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 239.

<sup>29</sup> Statement in the Knesset, 16 October 1973, text in Medzini, Documents, pp. 1044–1051.

nated in advance with Dado or Dayan and the IDF feared that it was somewhat premature. But both realized that Golda had to announce something positive for political reasons, yet the doubt if that was the right time to do so lingered in their minds for some time. Since the Egyptians had not reacted to the crossing, why supply them with information that something big was happening of their side of the Canal. The IDF Spokesman was told to issue a statement saying that an IDF task force was indeed operating in Egypt.<sup>30</sup>

She returned to Tel Aviv for additional consultations with her war cabinet mainly about the meaning and significance of Kossygin's visit to Cairo and what could possibly be the next American move. For that purpose, she held a number of telephone conversations with Dinitz. He was calmer now that the airlift was in full swing. The big debate as to who pushed for the airlift and who delayed it among the Nixon administration would erupt later. At this stage, the ambassador was trying to glean what America intended to do and what was the nature of the contacts between Washington, Moscow and Cairo. Dinitz and Kissinger maintained very friendly relations, but Dinitz often had the feeling that Kissinger was not always telling him the entire truth. In his memoirs, Kissinger confirmed that this was the case, and not only that, on occasion he even misled him. But in diplomacy, like in love and war, everything is permitted, even among friends. On that day, Golda declared: "I see the first signs of our victory, since we are being pressured to end the war".

The next day, the Israeli bridgehead was broadened and the time had come to think about making the arrangements to end the war. In a conversation with Dinitz, Kissinger told him that he thought the cease-fire would start on either 21 or 22 October. Through Dinitz, he asked what would be Golda's reaction to a cease-fire resolution that would be linked to Resolution 242. On October 18, Dinitz came back with Golda's answer. She rejected any linkage to Resolution 242, saying that it was adequate for the conditions that prevailed in 1967 but was no longer relevant to this war. Above all, she did not want to rush things. The IDF said it needed more time.<sup>31</sup> This time, the Egyptians were the ones openly pressing for a cease-fire, and they did this through the Russians. Brezhnev contacted Nixon on October 18 and asked him to accept a draft resolution to be approved by the Security Council that would call for a cease-fire and include a call for gradual Israeli withdrawal according to Resolution 242 as well as a call for appropriate consultations towards the establishment of a just peace in the Middle East.

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<sup>30</sup> Bartov, Dado, p. 249.

<sup>31</sup> Kissinger, Years of Upheaval, p. 539.

The sand clock was ticking, yet in Golda's office the atmosphere was visibly more relaxed. The airlift was moving at full pace. Golda even traveled to the airport to meet some of the crews that flew the C5A cargo planes. The situation on the Syrian front stabilized and there remained one objective there—to recapture the Mt. Hermon outpost to insure that the Syrians would suffer a crushing defeat. The bridgehead in Egypt was expanding and by October 19, there were over 250 Israeli tanks on the Egyptian side. It appeared that there was some time left to bolster the achievements and to end the war in a crushing victory so that the negotiations that would ensue would be more convenient for Israel. The vast improvement in the military situation was reflected in the mood in the Prime Minister's Office. Golda allowed herself more hours of sleep, but she also demonstrated growing signs of restlessness. She wondered aloud what was being concocted in Cairo and in Washington and called Dinitz more often to ask what he knew and essentially how much more time Israel would have at its disposal. He called Kissinger who calmed him. But that did not last long. A dramatic move was launched by the Russians. On October 19 Kissinger was summoned by Brezhnev to come to Moscow the next day to discuss a cease-fire. "It would be good if he could come tomorrow, October 20", wrote Brezhnev to Nixon.<sup>32</sup> The time was 1100 in Washington, 1800 in Israel. Dinitz called Golda and told her he estimated that Kissinger would have to accept the invitation. At 2115, she convened her war cabinet to discuss the new development. Tension once again rose in the smoke-filled room. The key question was how much time the IDF would still have to strengthen its bridgehead and above all to complete the encirclement of the Egyptian third army that was trapped between the Israeli forces in Sinai and the Canal. If that army surrenders, there would be no doubt that Egypt had lost the war and her initial achievements would be forgotten, something the Russians were determined to prevent at all cost. Golda assumed that Israel still had three to five days before the fighting would end.<sup>33</sup>

Good news came from Washington. President Nixon asked Congress to approve military aid to Israel valued at the unprecedented sum of 2.2 billion dollars in order to maintain the balance of power and thus obtain stability, he wrote. The president also told Congress that the airlift was moving to Israel various types of equipment that included ammunition, ground-to-ground and air-to-air missiles, tanks, airplanes, communications equipment and electronics worth some 852 million dollars. This request was aimed at helping Nixon obtain Israeli flexibility when the time would come. Kissinger left Washington hastily

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<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 542.

<sup>33</sup> Bartov, *Dado*, p. 285.

and told Dinitz that he did not expect any major decision would be made during this visit to Moscow and that Israel still had time. Dinitz asked Golda what he should tell Kissinger when the secretary of state asked to know how much more time Israel needed and above all what its objectives were. Golda authorized him to tell Kissinger that once there was a cease-fire, “it should find us holding a logical line from a military-political aspect”. Dinitz did remind Kissinger that the IDF had been fighting nonstop for 15 days and may have hinted to some Israeli fatigue.<sup>34</sup>

October 21 was a day replete with diplomatic activity focused on Moscow. Kissinger had hoped that he would have time to hear the Soviet proposals and then tell them that he had to return to Washington to consult with the president. But he was wrong. Nixon had told Brezhnev that Kissinger was authorized to discuss any proposal, which meant that he did not have to consult with the president and gain some time. On that day, Dayan told Israel Radio that Israel might agree to cease-fire either along the Canal or new lines and Yigal Allon told Arik Sharon that he had all the time he needed.<sup>35</sup> On that morning, there was no sense of tension or that time was quickly running out. The General Staff held discussions on how to end the war and mainly how fast the IDF should advance towards the city of Suez to complete the encirclement of the Third Army. Golda sat in her office and waited to hear the outcome of Kissinger’s talks in Moscow. At 2251, Dinitz was asked to come at once to the White House where he was told by General Scowcroft that the Soviet Union and the United States had decided to establish a cease-fire and a draft resolution was prepared that would soon get the number 338. It was brief:

The Security Council,

1. Calls upon all parties to the present fighting to cease all firing and terminate all military activity immediately, no later than 12 hours after the moment of the adoption of this decision, in the positions they now occupy.
2. Calls upon the parties concerned to start immediately after the cease-fire the implementation of Security Council Resolution 242 (1967) in all its parts.
3. Decides that immediately and concurrently with the cease-fire, negotiations start between the parties concerned under appropriate auspices aimed at establishing a just and durable peace in the Middle East.<sup>36</sup>

Dinitz further reported that Israel was being asked to respond at once because the Security Council had already been summoned. Kissinger then formulated a message from Nixon to Golda in which the president wrote that the cease-fire

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<sup>34</sup> Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, p. 546.

<sup>35</sup> Bartov, *Dado*, p. 300.

<sup>36</sup> Medzini, *Documents*, p. 1052.



was a major achievement for both Israel and the United States, since it left the forces in place, did not mention the word withdrawal, and for the first time the Soviets agreed to a resolution that called for negotiations with no prior conditions under appropriate auspices. Golda delayed her reply, saying that she was presented with a *fait accompli*, and asked for some time to study the resolution and seek cabinet approval before accepting it. She called Nixon in an effort to delay the convening of the Security Council. But Nixon's mind was in a totally different place: Watergate. Two days earlier, in what became known as the Saturday Night Massacre, he had fired his Attorney General and the Special Counsel who led the investigation. The United States was in an uproar. The president had no time or peace of mind to conduct lengthy talks with Golda. At midnight, the cabinet met and resolved to ask Kissinger to supply additional clarifications, preferably in person, before Israel made such a critical move, and Golda invited Kissinger to fly to Tel Aviv on his way back to Washington from Moscow the next day. His answer was delayed. Meanwhile, Nixon's personal message arrived. The chief of staff warned that the present cease-fire lines endangered the IDF and could put at risk some units in Egypt. But it was obvious that the United States would now call in the chips in return for what it had done for Israel during the war. Finally, the cabinet approved the acceptance of Resolution 338 and stated that Israel would accept it once it had been adopted by the Security Council. The Council did that and the cease-fire was due to start at 1852 local time. The previous night, soldiers of the Golani Brigade were able to capture the Mt. Hermon outpost at huge costs. This outpost was critical and it later became known as the "Eyes of the State". Kissinger announced that he was arriving at 1300 hours, as he stepped off the plane he told Eban: "Golda is certainly mad at me. I will explain to her exactly why I acted and why I was compelled to do so".<sup>37</sup>

A tense Israeli team faced Kissinger in the Mossad guest house. To Kissinger, the Israeli team that consisted of Golda, Dayan, Allon, Eban, Rabin, Dado, and Zeira looked exhausted and lacked the usual Israeli bravado.<sup>38</sup> During the first 15 minutes, Golda and Kissinger met face to face. There is no record of their talk. Later Gazit and Peter Rodman, Kissinger's senior aide, were invited to take notes of the ensuing discussion. The protocol was published many years later. Kissinger began by explaining the reason for including Resolution 242 in Resolution 338.

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<sup>37</sup> Eban, *Autobiography*, p. 531.

<sup>38</sup> On the talks see Bartov, Dado, pp. 315–318; Dayan, *Milestones*, p. 663; Eban, *Autobiography*, pp. 531–532; Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, pp. 559–567. See also FRUS, *Arab-Israeli Crisis and War, 1973*, Vol. XXV, Washington, 2011; Meron Medzini, "Golda Meir in the Yom Kippur War", in Yoram Dinstein and Avraham Zohar, eds., *40 Years After, A Researcher's Perspective on Failures and Achievements in the Yom Kippur War*, Tel Aviv, 2014, pp. 163–198.

He politely reminded Golda that the Americans viewed the outcome of the war differently than Israel and that the president was under massive Arab pressure to compel Israel to return to the 1967 lines, effectively using the oil weapon. Kissinger himself thought that the formulation of 242 was a joke and what counted were the results of negotiations. While he was in Moscow, Brezhnev wanted much more than 242, he demanded that all relevant UN resolutions on Palestine be implemented, which Kissinger refused. At this point, Golda intervened and said that 338 did not say specifically direct negotiations, simply negotiations under appropriate auspices, and wanted to know the meaning of this formulation. Kissinger replied—nothing, until the start of the negotiations. But Golda insisted saying that 338 said specifically that 242 was to be implemented. Kissinger said that everything was open to negotiations. Golda wondered if the Soviets agreed to this interpretation. Kissinger promised that he would explain the meaning of this formula in a press conference that he would hold in Washington the next day. Golda asked for his commitment for this interpretation, which he granted her. Golda then proceeded to say that there could be no progress until Israel learned of the fate of its prisoners of war. Kissinger said that he had Gromyko's word that the Russians would deal with this in Cairo. Kissinger suggested that Israel would not embark on negotiations before it learned about the status of the prisoners. Golda said that the cabinet decision accepting 338 was conditioned on the issue of the prisoners. She said that Sadat did not have to meet the wives of the prisoners, she did. She then thanked Kissinger for the airlift and told him of her visit to the airport to see the arrival of the planes. "It was far more than what I had ever dreamed."

Kissinger then related the Egyptian position and that he had told them that eventually they would realize that the American offer of October 8 to return to the cease-fire lines was the best. Golda said that Israel had a trauma whenever cease-fire and standstill was mentioned. It had learned a bitter lesson from what happened in August 1970. Kissinger admitted that no one knew where the present cease-fire lines were, much depended on the Russians and that Gromyko called Sadat a "Paper Camel". Golda replied that she understood that Sadat was convinced that he won the war. Kissinger allayed her fears, saying that objectively Israel had won mainly in view of the vast quantities of modern arms that Egypt and Syria had received from the Russians, to which Golda said that the Soviets would resupply them again. In view of the fact that Egypt and Syria had not yet announced their acceptance of the cease-fire, Kissinger hinted that Washington would have no argument if in the course of the night, while he was on his way to Washington, something happened. Golda then asked for an International Red Cross intervention to evacuate 4,000 Jews from Damascus and the removal of the Egyptian naval blockade on the Straits of Bab el Mandeb at the southern entrance

of the Red Sea. Kissinger promised that he would raise the issue in talks with the Russians. He also said that the airlift would continue and that twenty ships were being loaded with weapons, among them 40 "Skyhawks". He reminded Golda of the president's request of Congress to approve the 2.2 billion dollars for the airlift. The president, he added, was committed to compensate Israel for her losses in weapons. But it would be very much appreciated if some of Israel's supporters in the Senate, whom he called "maniacs", ceased to attack him. At the end of this part of the discussion, Kissinger reiterated his view that Israel had won the war and that the United States stood with it. The Arabs must know that they would have to deal with the United States, even though the Russians could still supply them with weapons; only America could get them a political settlement. He thought that Sadat would not survive the war. Golda contradicted him by saying that she was convinced more than ever that not only Sadat would survive, but he would emerge as a victorious hero, like Nasser after 1956. She was right. Already then, her senses had led her to realize that while Israel had won a very impressive military victory, albeit at the cost of over 2,600 dead, she suffered a humiliating political setback. "Sadat succeeded because he dared", she said to Kissinger.

The next phase of the talks was attended by Dayan, Allon, Eban, Rabin, Dinitz, Avraham Kidron (the Foreign Ministry director general), his deputy Efraim Evron, and Gazit. Kissinger was joined by Ambassador Kenneth Keating, Joseph Sisco, the State Department Spokesman McCloskey, Assistant Secretary of State Alfred Atherton, Winston Lord, the head of Policy Planning at the State Department, Kissinger's chief assistant Lawrence Eagleburger, and Peter Rodman. This team would help Kissinger conduct the negotiations for various Arab-Israeli interim agreements in the coming two years and their faces would become well known to the Israeli team. They were highly professional diplomats with vast experience, but none of them ever dared contradict Kissinger in public. Eban later recalled that one day he was traveling with Kissinger by car from the airport to Jerusalem. As they passed near the Trappist Monastery in Latroun, Eban explained that in that monastery only the abbot had the right to speak. Kissinger responded: "It's like the State Department. Everyone is silent but me." In this discussion, the question arose at what time exactly the cease-fire would take effect and who would announce it. Kissinger proposed that Israel announce it at 6 pm while he was on his plane and he would inform the Russians. From the very bitter experience of August 1970, Golda and Dayan wanted to know exactly where the lines would be and whether there was a mechanism to determine them. Kissinger replied that the reality on the ground would dictate the new lines. He also promised that there would be a quick prisoners' exchange. Golda told him that the next day she was due to appear before the Knesset in order to explain what had led Israel to accept the cease-fire. Unless she had a very convincing explanation

regarding the prisoners, she would have a hard time because in her October 16 address to the Knesset, she made a commitment that there would be no cease-fire unless accompanied by a prisoners' exchange. Dayan and even Golda praised the Egyptian forces that fought valiantly as long as it was according to the book. Dayan added that the Syrians fought with much emotion as though this was a holy war. He added that he foresaw problems with the cease-fire lines in the absence of a mechanism to implement and supervise the cease-fire. Kissinger had to admit that in Moscow there was no discussion about a standstill zone, especially regarding movement of SAM missiles. At the end of this part of the meeting, Kissinger hinted how he saw the evolving political process. It would start with a historic event, even if it ended in a stalemate, which he predicted. He did not assume that the Jarring mission would be restarted and that there would be no meaningful role given to the United Nations secretary general.

The third and shortest part of the meeting was devoted to a military briefing. The participants were now joined by Dado, Air Force Commander Benny Peled and Intelligence Chief Ely Zeira. Dado explained the new and very complicated military situation that had been created. On the Syrian front, the IDF had captured Mt. Hermon and was positioned near the road leading to Damascus. There were still an Iraqi division and two Jordanian armored brigades, but Israel was on the whole satisfied with the situation on that front. As for the Canal front, the Egyptians were successful in establishing a bridgehead of 8–12 kilometers in depth east of the Canal, but the IDF encircled the Third Army, blocked the Cairo–Suez road and advanced some 15 kilometers inside Egypt. The Air Force commander enumerated Israel's losses: 32 "Phantoms", 53 "Skyhawks", 11 "Mirage", 6 "Super Mystere", all together 102 planes and two helicopters. The problem was that Israel was left with 70 crews able to fly the "Phantoms" whereas it still possessed between 80 and a 100 "Phantoms" that had to be manned. The IDF had not been successful in destroying all the missile batteries and there remained 16–17 SAM 6 batteries. Peled reported that the Egyptian Air Force lost 254 "MIGS", "Mirages", "Sukhoys", "Tupolev 16" in addition to 33 helicopters of the M-18 type. The Syrians had lost 250 planes. Israel still faced a problem of how to find a proper answer to the Egyptian missiles.

Zeira reported that early that morning, two Egyptian planes had flown over the Canal, probably flown by Russian pilots. The Syrians started the war with 1,700 tanks and lost over a 1000. They were already receiving new tanks from the Russians and had at their disposal 200 Iraqi and 150 Jordanian tanks. He warned that Syria was capable of resuming the fighting and possessed anti-aircraft missiles. The Egyptians still had their First and Second Armies, while the encircled Third Army had four brigades that could still fight. Zeira reported also that Libya had sent two brigades to Egypt and Algeria one. He also mentioned the presence

of North Koreans in Syria. Kissinger probably understood better now that the cease-fire saved Egypt from a disastrous military defeat. He now understood why the Russians were so insistent that he come to Moscow at once and reach a decision on the spot. At the conclusion, Kissinger expressed Nixon's and his own admiration of the great achievements of the IDF which had gained for them for the first time since 1949, the Arabs' willingness to engage in direct talks with Israel. When he told Golda that on his way back to Washington, he had scheduled a meeting with the British Foreign Secretary Sir Alec Douglas Hume, she said: "Give him my love". He knew well how she regarded this man. In her concluding remarks, Golda thanked the president and the secretary of state and said that Israel had undergone the worst days in its history. She remembered that during the War of Independence, three men came from the Jordan Valley to Ben-Gurion and were in tears when they reported that the Syrians were attacking them and they urgently needed help. Ben-Gurion told them he had nothing to spare them as everything was sent to Jerusalem. She recalled that Ben-Gurion told her that "when I saw these men weeping I thought that all was lost". In this war, they had not wept, but they had very bitter hours. She added that while Kissinger could not get a second Nobel Prize, his name was now engraved in Israel's annals for helping this tiny country. At 1730, Kissinger resumed his flight to Washington and Dado then reported to Golda about the arrangements made for the cease-fire. He said that if the Egyptians initiated more fighting, the IDF would respond. She told him that the Russians had promised Kissinger an early reply on prisoners' exchange.

That evening, she faced the entire cabinet and told her ministers that in various places the cease-fire was being observed, while in some places the Egyptians were still firing. In this meeting, the ministers expressed their misgivings over the decision to accept the cease-fire, one to which they had not been a party. Golda explained with much patience what had led her to accept and said that she would explain the same to the nation in her Knesset address the next day. Even during the war, Golda sought to operate according to the normal democratic procedure: bring to the approval of the entire cabinet all major military, political and diplomatic moves. Dayan showed increasing signs of impatience over the remarks of some ministers (in his memoirs he mentioned specifically the ministers of Tourism and Religious Affairs) who spoke on military matters of which they did not have a clue. She recalled that the ministers had not been told of the looming war and wanted at least to involve them in the moves towards its conclusion. Not that she overrated their opinions on defense and foreign affairs, but she wanted to make sure that formally, things would be done according to the book, and all this under the growing shadow of the demand to appoint a Commission of Inquiry.

On October 23, she summoned the American ambassador. She asked Keating to tell Kissinger that she was now facing mounting domestic problems. She was angry at what she considered Hussein's insulting demand that the cease-fire be applied also to the West Bank and reported on the situation in the Canal Zone. There, she confessed to the ambassador, the IDF generals were demanding they be given additional two-to three days to fully encircle the Third Egyptian Army, but that the cabinet refused to approve. This conversation was meant to tell Kissinger that the shooting in the south had not entirely stopped. This was a timely reminder. By then, UN secretary general Waldheim had complained to Kissinger that Egypt had told him that the IDF violated the cease-fire. The Soviet Minister in Washington, Yuri Vorontsov, called Kissinger and informed him that the Soviet Union was about to demand that the Security Council be summoned to confirm once again Resolution 338 and demand that the parties return to the lines they had held on October 22. Kissinger called Dinitz and he promised on behalf of Golda that Israel had not initiated violations of the cease-fire. Kissinger then read to him the Soviet draft resolution and Dinitz could only say that he would transmit it to Golda. Several minutes later, Golda herself called Kissinger and complained about the Egyptian violations. He suggested that the IDF withdraw several hundred meters, but he also added: "Who knows where there is a line in the desert", Golda replied cynically: "They will know full well where our present line is". Kissinger assumed that by then the IDF had completed the encirclement of the Third Army and cut off the city of Suez from food and water.<sup>39</sup>

The IDF continued its advance south of the city of Suez, where it suffered a large number of casualties, many of them in the city of Suez. On the Syrian front, a war of attrition ensued and ended only once Israel decided to reject the call to withdraw to the lines of October 22. Another Soviet threat alarmed Nixon a great deal, and Golda less. She was busy going over her speech to the Knesset. It was not a victory speech of the type Ben-Gurion had made after the Sinai War and Eshkol after the Six Days War. In a tired and monotonous voice she read the uninspiring speech that Galili had written.<sup>40</sup> It contained a long explanation why the government of Israel had to accept the American request to observe a cease-fire. "We responded to the request of the American president because of our great esteem and appreciation for the American positive policy in the Middle East at this time". She mentioned the American military aid and said that Israel in fact had achieved its aims. The achievements were of such magnitude to justify the agreement to accept the cease-fire. Israel also wanted to avoid unnecessary loss of life.

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<sup>39</sup> Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, p. 571.

<sup>40</sup> Statement in the Knesset, 23 October 1973, text in Medzini, *Documents*, pp. 1055–1061.

This was not her finest speech. She sounded and looked fatigued and tense. She was not worried about what the opposition would have to say, and indeed Begin said it with his incomparable rhetorical skill; she was more troubled over but what would happen next in the Suez Canal, would the IDF be permitted to annihilate the Third Army or would it be denied this crowning achievement?

When she returned to her office in Tel Aviv, she asked that Kissinger be informed that Israel would not accept Soviet and Egyptian dictates, would reject Resolution 339 and would not consider it even as basis for negotiations. Kissinger was now openly alarmed. The destruction of the Third Army would be interpreted to mean that Israel wanted to see the final downfall of Sadat, and if this happened, the entire political edifice he had so carefully constructed would collapse. He knew that Sadat sent a personal message to Nixon in which he asked that Israel be reined in. Egypt had now begun to engage in closer ties with the United States, although formally their diplomatic relations during the Six Days War were not yet restored. He ignored Israel and pressed for the adoption of Resolution 339 which confirmed the demand for an immediate cease-fire Resolution 338 and called for the return of the armed forces of the parties to the lines they held the before the cease-fire took effect. Her reaction was: "He can forget about it, we are not withdrawing. More than that, the cease-fire would not exist unless it was mutual. As long as they are firing, so are we".<sup>41</sup>

On October 24, the drama reached its apex. Brezhnev called Nixon on behalf of Sadat and warned that the Russians were considering sending troops to the Middle East. Kissinger now demanded a real cease-fire from Israel, threatening that if she refused, he would cut off his ties with her. A cabinet meeting held on that day was devoted to a discussion about the Third Army. While no clear-cut decision was made, Israel finally relented and promised that the cease-fire would go into effect that evening. That was the final decision she made during the course of the war.

In retrospect, going over the key decisions made during the war, it emerges that Golda was the one who pushed to reach the decisions on the key military and political issues. Years later, Galili checked and found that Golda was involved in the major decisions, among them to accept the view of the chief of staff on the dimensions of the call-up on October 6, not to attack Jordan during the war, even though Jordan sent a token two brigades to Syria that took part in the war. Hussein made sure that Israel would be told in advance. She did not go along with the changing moods of Dayan, she insisted on the airlift and emphasized that

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<sup>41</sup> Bartov, Dado, p. 333.

there would be no withdrawal to the lines of October 22.<sup>42</sup> That day, the war was about to end. The shooting on the Egyptian front ceased only the next day, but it was obvious that Israel still had some hours before it would come into effect. Occasional firing continued on the Golan Heights until Israel and Syria signed a Separation of Forces Agreement on May 31, 1974.

Golda had no time to find emotional and physical relief after the enormous tension under which she had been laboring for the past three weeks. It was obvious to her that now the diplomatic struggle would start, far more complicated than the one she had conducted after the Sinai War. This time, there would be no Ben-Gurion, she would have to lead it. The task was to salvage politically what could be salvaged from the virtually impossible situation Israel found itself in. There was also the immediate need to rehabilitate the IDF, to restore the national morale and even to prepare for the coming elections that would take place under entirely new conditions. She knew that soon she would be called upon to tell the public exactly what had happened on the eve of the war. In those days, it was not clear whether she really understood let alone predicted the destructive results of the war on Israel's international standing and on the standing of the Labor Party. It was very difficult for her to adjust to the new cruel and at times impossible new reality. The transition from the euphoria that followed the Six Days War to the new harsh reality was too much for her. Emotionally and physically she was not ready for this. The cabinet had not yet met to discuss the implications of the war on Israeli society, economy, military and international relations. True, no similar discussions were held after the previous wars, but the difference was that Israel was facing elections and the results of the war were bound to influence them heavily. Deep in her heart, she knew it would be her lot to confront this new reality. No wonder that she often used the expressions "I will never forgive myself" or "If it were not for the Yom Kippur War..."

Yet the war confirmed once again one of Golda's more outstanding traits—her leadership qualities. During those critical days, she led Israel with a cool head, much common sense and inner conviction that Israel would win. But leadership does not only mean functioning in an exemplary fashion during times of crisis, but also the ability to predict and anticipate events. She did not engage in long-range strategic thinking, apart from the plans the IDF had, the government of Israel did not have a comprehensive drawer plan in case war broke out. She refused to appoint a National Security Council, in the course of the hostilities the war cabinet functioned with no position papers, no orderly staff work and

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42 Ben-Porat, *Conversations*, p. 125.



no consultations with experts outside the establishment. Some of this verged on the amateurish. The great miracle was that many of the decisions that resulted more from her good intuition than from orderly thinking turned out good. At age 75, after a terrible war that cost Israel more than 2,500 dead, she was unable to change the habits she had acquired over many decades. But there was no time to ponder and hold analytic seminars. She was called upon to make major decisions again.

## 19 Salvage (1973–1974)

The shooting had not yet died down when Golda had to take one of the most difficult decisions in her long public life. Between October 23, 1973, when the war officially ended, and April 10, 1974, the day of her final resignation, she found herself in a most untenable situation. She realized that after the earthquake, she could not carry on her duties as though nothing had happened. Yet she also knew that she could not just get up and shed all responsibility and simply disappear from the public eye. Resignation at this time seemed to her as an expression of cowardice. Resignation at this critical juncture could be interpreted as betraying the movement and the nation and would inevitably hasten the struggle for her succession at the worst possible time. As always, she was terrified that an internal power struggle in the Labor Party would only contribute to the strengthening of the Likud. She also wondered what would be the outcome of the negotiations promised by Kissinger and included in Resolution 338. Who would make sure that Israel did not budge from her basic policies?

Her natural inclination was to remain at the helm and to mobilize her waning mental, emotional and physical powers, to embark on a massive salvaging operation and rescue what could be saved. She was visibly exhausted, her mind still refused to come to terms with what had happened, her energy waned, but she made up her mind—she would stand rocklike in the face of the new challenges and perils that now faced Israel from within and mainly from without. Around her, she felt the growing bitterness and frustration and impatience. The General Staff was convinced that the IDF was denied a last-moment chance to end the war with a significant victory, at least in the destruction of the Third Army. The anger was also evident in her cabinet, in the party, and soon spilled over to the streets of Israel. It would no longer be possible to govern Israel on the basis of a national consensus, of overcoming crises through the old way of managing them by inter-party negotiations, as was the practice in Israeli politics. Now the focus of attention would move to the American arena and through the United States to Egypt. The Americans would consider their own interests, and not Israel's, as dominant. From now on, the game would be played under new rules. Israel would no longer dictate the moves and Golda would no longer control the unfolding events.

Her days, and above all her nights, were times of great agony and torture. She, who all her life craved for admiration and needed compliments and encouragement, now felt rejected. The appreciation and adulation she sought all her life was taken from her overnight. She knew well that although she had provided exemplary leadership during the war, she could not escape from sharing the responsibility for it. Her character was such that she never shirked responsibility. She understood fully well the meaning of the English word accountability, which

in Hebrew meant a mixture of bearing responsibility and the need to pay the price, terms that were not that common in Israeli politics. She knew that sooner or later she would be called upon to explain her involvement in the responsibility for what took place. She, who had promised Israel relative quiet, security and continued economic prosperity, was at the helm when a war broke out that resulted in unprecedented number of dead and wounded, in a huge economic cost and the loss of the public trust in its leaders. Would this be the way she would be remembered? Throughout her career, she never placed much importance on how she would be remembered and what would be her place in the history of the Jewish people and of Israel. Now she was more sensitive to how her deeds during that period would be documented, and what would be the judgment of history of her. After half a century of public service, would this be the way to end it when the public turned away from her and she was utterly spurned and rejected?

But she could not run away from reality. A year after the war, her close friend Ya'acov Hazan said in a radio interview: She could never forgive herself to her dying day. She actually said that her life ended with the Yom Kippur War, not her political life, but her life. Why? Because she could never forgive herself that she had not followed her fears and senses, and had accepted a great deal of the advice of those around her. She said that she had felt that the danger was enormous, but from all sides she had heard calming voices and she accepted their reassurance. Now she realized, she would never forgive herself that she had done so. She said that legally and juridically she was on solid grounds, so no stain would be found on her. But that did not interest her at all. She said that what interested her most was that she, Golda Meir, the prime minister of Israel, was bound to sense the danger, and she felt it. What she could never forgive herself was that she had not been true to herself on that occasion, she had been loyal to her advisers, and that was a huge failure that she could never forgive herself and never mind that the Agranat Commission said that she was innocent of any wrongdoing, and no one faulted her. That did not interest her. She blamed herself for actually being untrue to herself.

The harsh reality did not leave her much time to ponder. The central issue that now faced Israel was how to insure that Security Council Resolution 338 would not halt the IDF advance and deployment on the Egyptian side of the Suez Canal. On October 23 she addressed the Knesset and explained why Israel had accepted that resolution. She made it clear that as long as Egypt honored the cease-fire, so would Israel. But words apart and deeds apart. The IDF continued to advance towards the city of Suez and to encircle the Third Army. A day earlier, Dado had asked for three-four more days and expressed fear that a total freeze on any military movement would place the soldiers of some units under great peril and even the possibility that they would be trapped by the Egyptian army.

The war, as noted already, actually continued on October 24 and 25. Kissinger rightly estimated that the IDF was seeking to annihilate the Third Army and feared that the United States' credibility would collapse. How would Sadat regard the United States and Kissinger personally? He knew that one of the reasons that led Sadat to accept the cease-fire and greater American involvement was his wish to extract the beleaguered Third Army. Kissinger feared that Sadat could turn back to the Soviet Union, thereby destroying the American diplomacy that Kissinger had so carefully nurtured during the war. Kissinger also knew that Israel needed several more days to annihilate the Third Army and assumed that this could lead to a major American-Soviet confrontation. The Russians would blame the Americans for colluding with Israel against Egypt. Both the Russians and the Americans wanted to make sure that Sadat did not suffer additional humiliating setbacks. This time, Kissinger told his aides, the syndrome of the Six Days War would not be repeated. Sadat would retain his honor and agree to replace the military option against Israel by a political one under American auspices.<sup>1</sup>

On October 23, Israel already found itself under mounting pressure from the White House that demanded an immediate cease-fire. The Soviets demanded an immediate convening of the Security Council and this body adopted Resolution 339.<sup>2</sup> That midnight, the IDF finally completed the encirclement of the Third Army. The next day, Sadat despatched an urgent message to Kissinger asking for assistance to the besieged 20,000 soldiers. During the next two days, the leaders of Israel, the United States and the Soviet Union were busy with the question of who would be responsible for supplying the Third Army. Would the Egyptians do so with Israel agreeing or would it be done by the Soviets who would not even ask Israel for permission? If that option was realized, the global tension would rise to impossible levels. Would it be the Americans who would do so even without Israel's agreement?

On October 26, the American patience ran out and they intensified the pressures on Golda Meir to allow the movement of food, water and medicine to the Third Army. Golda resisted and Kissinger mobilized all his resources to convince her to change her mind. That Friday evening, she sat in her office in Tel Aviv and received frantic phone calls that came from Washington. The callers included senators, congressmen, Jewish leaders, governors, heads of the Trade Union movement, Kissinger and finally the president himself. All of them reminded Golda what the United States had done for Israel during the war. Golda was convinced

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<sup>1</sup> Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, pp. 575–591; Bartov, *Dado*, pp. 309–310; see also FRUS, Vol. XXV, pp. 733–1247.

<sup>2</sup> Medzini, *Documents*, p. 1061.

that Israel needed urgently to demonstrate that on the battlefield it had won a major achievement. But if that if this were to be denied to her, she at least asked for a visible and tangible reward for her agreement to enable the supply to the Third Army. Kissinger replied that his promise to arrange direct negotiations between Israel and Egypt should be considered an adequate *quid pro quo*. This would be the first time since 1949 that the two nations would conduct open negotiations with the aim of reaching an agreement, and this would be under the authority of Resolution 338. On the basis of this promise, Golda convened her cabinet for an emergency meeting to discuss Kissinger's proposal. Golda finally relented and accepted his offer, saying to Kissinger: "We believe that we have something to offer them—something that is not surrender or humiliation, but an honorable way out of the situation. What the Egyptians now have to do is to propose the time, the place and the level of their representatives". However, she said nothing about the lifting of the siege on the Third Army, something that the Russians and Sadat were very anxious to hear.<sup>3</sup>

That evening, Nixon held a press conference and announced that the United States was putting its armed forces on top alert to signal to the Soviets that the United States would not tolerate a unilateral Soviet move. The alert was declared when news arrived that led America to believe that the Russians were planning to send troops to the Middle East. The Soviets also asked for another Security Council session in which the Council would once again call on the parties to scrupulously observe the cease-fire. Israel was once again alone and isolated. The Soviets threatened military action, the Americans proclaimed top alert and the Security Council met. Late that night, Dinitz called Golda and told her of a conversation he had had with Kissinger, whose contents were ominous. Kissinger, said Dinitz, phoned him saying he was calling on behalf of the president and told him that the United States could not accept the destruction of the Third Army. He demanded a reply, within the next nine hours, concerning whether Israel would allow the movement of supplies to the Third Army. If Israel refused, the United States would support a Security Council call for strict observance of the cease-fire and act to achieve it on an international scale. That could mean that the supply would be done by a UN force. Kissinger, according to Dinitz, added: "Your policy is suicidal, you would not be permitted to annihilate this army. You are ruining the chances of the possibility for negotiations".<sup>4</sup>

In those early hours of the morning, Golda once again faced a critical dilemma. The IDF asked her to postpone her reply. But she realized, especially in view of

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<sup>3</sup> Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, p. 605.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 608–609.

Dinitz' report, that she would have to accept the American ultimatum. As was her wont, she wanted to know what Israel would get in return. She also wanted to make sure that the world would hear that Israel was giving in only because of massive American pressure. She decided to send Kissinger a message: "I have no illusions that the two superpowers would impose everything on us... What should Israel do in order for Egypt to announce the victory of her aggression? ... There is one thing no one can take away from us—to declare the truth about our situation, that Israel is being punished not because of her deeds but because of her size and the fact that she is alone".<sup>5</sup> On October 27, she had an angry telephone exchange with Kissinger. He claimed that Israel had violated understandings it had reached with the United States and through America with Egypt over what steps should be taken and by whom to supply the Third Army. She claimed that an Israeli representative arrived at a certain spot to coordinate the supply with the Egyptians, but they failed to appear. Kissinger promised an immediate inquiry.

Sadat's agreement to begin direct negotiations between Israeli and Egyptian representatives on kilometer 101 on the Cairo-Suez Road prevented a serious deterioration in America-Israeli relations. This move in addition to the creation of a United Nations Emergency Force, according to Security Council Resolution 340 adopted on October 25, 1973, enabled Israel to permit the passage of non-military supplies to the Third Army. An international crisis was thus averted. For Golda, this was an additional blow in a series of blows she endured since October 6. She bowed her head but did not break.

When supplies began to arrive for the Third Army, Israeli and Egyptian officers met on October 29 to discuss ways to assure the observance of the cease-fire and how to conduct the negotiations. Formally, the war on the Egyptian front came to an end. Shooting continued on the Golan Heights. Concurrently, the United States, the Western European nations and Japan began to feel the impact of the Arab oil embargo that meant a severe cutback in production and a stiff rise in the price of the precious energy resource. The American moves were henceforth very much influenced by the desire to ease the oil shortage that was affecting the lives of millions of people. Israeli and American diplomats began to plan their new strategy. Israel realized that the war had destroyed the myth of the invincible IDF. Its leaders began to come to terms with the terrible cost of the war. The Israeli economy was on the verge of collapse. The war cost the Israeli economy some nine billion dollars or a sum equal to the country's gross national product for a year and a half. The world was yearning for oil and Israel appeared as an obstacle for the resumption of its previous flow. Israel's international standing

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 609.

suffered a major blow. Most of the African nations suspended diplomatic relations while most of the Western European nations displayed growing neutrality bordering on anti-Israel attitude. Most of them refused to allow the American airlift to overfly their air spaces. The only European country that openly stood by Israel was Holland and it paid a heavy price for that support. Israel was isolated and the morale of its citizens at its lowest level.

At home, questions were being asked, first quietly and then vocally: who was responsible for what happened? The public refused to accept the fact that the IDF had won a very impressive military achievement although at an unbearable cost in lives. As the reservists were slowly demobilized and returned home, they began to tell stories and the public began to hear of the lack of preparation, the late call-up and the many problems that arose at the start of the war mostly among the generals at the Egyptian front. To this day, Israelis recall with a sense of shame and humiliation the first week of the war, preferring to ignore the final days, when the IDF launched a counteroffensive that brought it to some 42 kilometers from Damascus and 100 kilometers from Cairo. Israelis had no other choice but to take a long breath, overcome the anger and frustrations and begin the long and painful process of rehabilitation. After burying its many dead, Israel turned first to the rehabilitation of the IDF, to replenish its losses in people and equipment, to train air and tank crews, to absorb new weapons and prepare for the possibility that the war could resume. The IDF began to learn the lessons of the war while the political echelon made the preparations for a prolonged diplomatic struggle under the most unfavorable conditions. Now was not the time to exchange accusations as to who was right and who was wrong in the years between the Six Days War and the Yom Kippur War. Eban and Sapir refrained from open criticism while other leaders preferred not to unburden themselves of their views, certainly not two months before the elections. A new and strange situation was created. The leadership kept quiet, anything it could say would be interpreted as part of the election campaign. The government badly needed to lift the public morale, but its leaders avoided public appearance lest they be asked searing questions about the events that led to the war. This situation was very helpful to the Likud that used the public mood in its election campaign that started even before the guns fell silent. Golda could not use her best weapon—her power to convince and persuade. She could no longer face the public and least of all look the bereaved families straight in the eyes. At this point, she had no convincing explanations and the best way was to avoid public appearances. That only served to further erode the public morale because the people not only wondered about what had led to the war but also about some of the diplomatic moves that followed it.

The only ray of hope that emerged from an otherwise dismal situation was the limited expectation that direct talks with the Egyptians could result in an

interim or limited agreement on which further understandings could be reached in the future. Egypt realized that resumption of the war would mean total reliance on the Soviet Union, and knew that even the Russians were unable to help them prevent the Israelis from crossing the Canal. Egypt had no choice but to go through Washington, this would mean slow separation from the Soviet Union that could supply them with weapons, but had no political leverage on Israel. The Americans had the means to compel Israel to accept a political settlement, but would demand a price from Egypt in the shape of talks with Israel under American auspices.

The problem that faced Israeli and American decision makers was how to begin to move, slowly but deliberately, from a state of total war to a state of ending the hostilities. At this stage, no one dared to speak about the possibility of moving in one fell swoop to a state of total peace. The American decision-making process was very well organized and Kissinger's team was highly experienced and practiced. They knew what orderly staff work meant, how position papers were written and presented. Kissinger was a taskmaster who demanded absolute loyalty but also gave his staff leeway to propose new ideas, which they did. In Israel, the picture was different. The decision makers were still Golda, Dayan and Galili, whom the people considered as the architects of the war. Apart from Dayan, they were not used to orderly staff work. There was no National Security Council and the senior officials at the Foreign Ministry were not trusted, since they were associated with Eban. The IDF was used to orderly staff work and that helped the defense minister who came to many of the discussions well prepared. But his standing had been eroded by his behavior during the early days of the war. The Israeli leaders now had to navigate the ship of state in very stormy and unchartered waters. They knew that Israel would have to consider withdrawal, something they had avoided in the past unless it was in the context of a binding peace treaty negotiated directly by the parties with no prior conditions. Withdrawal, they felt, could be necessary, but how deep, to which new lines, in return for what? To avoid a discussion about the return to the 1967 lines, they were ready to accept the principles of the new Kissinger diplomacy, some of which he drew from Moshe Dayan.

Kissinger was determined that the United States must engage in the new diplomatic initiative with full speed and with much determination. The purpose was multifaceted. The United States would slowly bring about the disappearance of the Soviet Union from Egypt and then from the entire Middle East. There would be a major effort to end the oil embargo. The United States must strengthen its position among the so-called moderate Arab states. Israel would be made to pay the price for this new strategy, but Israel would also gain from the proposed process. It would start direct negotiations with Egypt, and the withdrawal would



be minimal and not total. The focus would be on Egypt alone. The Americans would not press on core issues in the Israel-Arab conflict at this time. There would be no discussion on the future of the Palestinians, on refugees, on Jerusalem, on the return to the 1967 lines. The agreements would be limited in time and space and each agreement would be accompanied by an Israel-American Memorandum of Understanding that would spell out America's commitments to Israel in the military, political and diplomatic spheres. These new ideas were the subject of a conversation between Kissinger and the Egyptian Foreign Minister Ismail Fahmy who came to Washington on October 29. Golda heard about the ideas when she arrived in the American capital on October 31. Her trip was designed to hear at first hand what the Americans intended to do next, how to bring an end to the shooting in the Syrian Salient, how to get back Israeli prisoners held in Syrian captivity and how to replenish the depleted IDF stores.

A day before she headed for Washington, she decided to do something she had refrained from doing during the war—visit the IDF units on the Egyptian front. Early that morning, she took off by helicopter from Tel Aviv, accompanied by Dayan, Galili, Dado and a host of aides and reporters. She headed south and her first stop was the headquarters of the Southern Command in Umm Hashibah. Haim Bar-Lev gave a thorough explanation of what transpired during the war and the current situation. She sat in the War Room of the Southern Command, the place where the great drama took place, the site of the bitter personal encounters between Bar-Lev, Gonen and Sharon. She now understood better what happened on that front and how problematic the present cease-fire lines that were never really defined. The next stop was to the other side of the Canal. On the way she felt dizzy, a young doctor, whose specialty was gynecology, gave her a shot and she revived. Several minutes later, she rose and stood next to the helicopter door as it flew over the Suez Canal. Below, she could see the wrecked tanks, armoured personnel carriers and destroyed trucks. She could see the huge holes created by thousands of shells fired during the war. Suddenly—a sliver of water, and Golda became the first Israeli prime minister who crossed the Suez Canal into Egyptian territory. It can be safely assumed that this was not the way she had hoped to travel to Egypt, a country she first visited in 1921 on her way to Palestine.

Pale and drawn, she landed in the division headquarters of General Avraham Adan. After she heard his briefing, she turned to chat with the soldiers who were amazed to see an old woman trudging in the sand, eating from messkits, smiling and exuding confidence. The next stop was at the Gonen division where she asked him to point out exactly where the cease-fire line was and how the Third Army was being supplied. She also wanted detailed explanations what had transpired since the cease-fire went into effect, so that she could better explain all this to Nixon and Kissinger. From there, she flew to the headquarters of General Kalman

Magen, where he calmly explained his deployment. Magen would die of a heart attack several days later. She then mounted a weapons carrier that brought her to the southernmost point reached by the IDF, the Egyptian port city of Addabiyah, south of Port Ibrahim. Sitting on a wicker chair, next to a fence built around a destroyed building, surrounded by soldiers, she answered their questions with much patience. She told them why it was necessary to accept the cease-fire and what led the government to approve the supplies to the Third Army. Instead of Golda comforting the soldiers, some of whom had been fighting for over two weeks, it appeared that they encouraged her and wished her much success in her forthcoming talks in Washington. The soldiers were mostly veteran reservists, they looked tired, but they succeeded in strengthening her resolve and raising her morale.

At the end of this visit, a soldier called out: “Golda, be strong”. She replied: “I don’t even have the strength for that”. The long day was not yet over. The final visit was to the Sharon division. The war hero had harsh things to tell the prime minister. He opposed the cease-fire and thought that Israel had folded up too early and for no reason on the eve of a smashing military victory. Unlike Adan and Magen, she now had to deal with a general who was also a politician. Even before the war ended, Sharon embarked on what became known as “the war of the Jews”. He blamed the Labor Alignment for what happened. The wars of the generals on the Southern front were highly explosive because the two key and contending personalities, Bar-Lev and Sharon, were candidates for the next Knesset, Bar-Lev on the part of Labor and Sharon as a Likud candidate.

Golda mounted the helicopter after a long and tiring day and fell asleep at once. This was a long day that included flights, travel by jeep, walking in the soft sand to command posts, meeting with soldiers and arguing with Sharon. Her capacity to gain the soldiers’ respect and to assert her authority stood out on that day. Her spirit was undaunted. When she returned to Tel Aviv she told her aides: “Now I can face the Americans with greater determination”. She finally understood at first hand the new military reality.

A day later, Kissinger noted in his memoirs that:

Golda Meir who arrived in Washington on October 31, was a different person from the leader who had so confidently, even cockily, told Nixon a few months earlier: ‘We’ve never had it so good.’ The war had devastated her, she maintained her strong leadership but she suffered with every bereaved Israeli family. And in that psychological condition, she had to guide her people into a new and largely unfamiliar international environment.<sup>6</sup>

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6 *Ibid.*, p. 619.

When she arrived in Washington, the Third Army was still besieged, although it was being given food, water and medicine that came through the Israeli lines under Red Cross supervision. Israel insisted on the immediate lifting of the Egyptian naval blockade in the Straits of Bab El Mandeb and a prisoners' exchange. Since she arrived a day after the visit of Fahmy, she suspected that the Americans and Egyptians were plotting together. Accompanied by Dinitz, General Yariv, Gazit and Lior, in her first meeting with Kissinger that was held in the early morning hours of 1 November, she challenged him by saying, "we need to know the plans that are being discussed. We need to know, do we get things after they're done? After it is worked out by other parties...maybe Israel has to do everything Egypt wants. But we have to know what is being planned between the parties. Are there plans for negotiations? We are responsible to our people."

Two days later, she asked Kissinger that if the Israelis started peace negotiations, what would then happen to them. The Soviets, the Europeans and the Japanese would not change, she argued. The Arabs still had the oil. How would they know that there would not be additional pressure on Israel to make concessions? He had to calm her down, saying that nothing would be done without Israel's agreement. He understood that without Israel's cooperation, his diplomatic edifice would fall apart. The protocol of that conversation was indicative of the tone and content of the discussion when Kissinger tried to explain to her the new international reality.

Meir: We didn't start the war, yet...

Kissinger: Madame Prime Minister, we are faced with a very tragic situation. You didn't start the war, but you face a need for wise decisions to protect the survival of Israel. This is what you face. This is my honest judgment as a friend.

Meir: You are saying we have no choice.

Kissinger: We face the international situation that I described to you.

Meir: You are saying we have to accept the judgment of the U.S. We have to accept your judgment? Even on our own affairs? On what is best for us?

Kissinger: We all have to accept the judgment of other nations. We're deferring to your judgment.<sup>7</sup>

She rightly feared that once Israel started making concessions, there would be no end to them and in return Egypt would only provide vague noncommitting promises that would be based on American assurances to Israel. For a moment, she recalled the scenes of 1957 and 1967. The spectre of these events haunted

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 621–622.

her like a heavy shadow. She did not trust anyone. Beyond that, on the eve of Knesset elections, how could she come back home with Israel having agreed in principle to concessions without a similar Egyptian commitment at least on the issue of prisoners' exchange? Her doubts were strengthened by Kissinger's remarks that did not convince her. As usual, he kept the heavy artillery for the next meeting. When she met Nixon two hours later, the president said to her that the

problem you now have to consider is whether the policy you have followed—being prepared with the Phantoms and the Skyhawks—can succeed, lacking a settlement. The question of being prepared for war—although even with a peace settlement you will have to be prepared—is sufficient. The last war proves the overwhelming conclusion that a policy of digging in, telling us to give you the arms and you will do the fighting, can't be the end. Your policy has to be to move as you are moving toward talks.<sup>8</sup>

While in Washington, she lived in Blair House, a place she well remembered from previous visits, held in a more comfortable and congenial atmosphere. This time, the mood was heavy, since Golda had to deal with another burden, the concern for the Israeli prisoners of war in Egypt and in Syria. When it came to Egypt, there was news that they were being treated relatively better and their health was on the whole good. They also received visits from the International Red Cross representatives. Above all, Israel knew the names of the prisoners. The situation was totally different when it came to Syria. During the fighting, they had already murdered some Israeli prisoners, they also refused any Red Cross visits, and apart from the Syrians, no one knew how many prisoners they were holding and how many were alive. The families in Israel intensified their pressure and Golda was ready to offer a deal to the Syrians. Israel would give them half of Mt. Hermon in return for the prisoners, but the Syrians refused.

Her short visit to Washington did not raise Golda's spirits. On the contrary, her intuition told her that henceforth the moves, the pace and perhaps even the results would be dictated by the United States and by Kissinger in person. The president was up to his neck in the Watergate Affair, and any direct appeal to him that bypassed Kissinger was of no use. Even turning to Congressmen and Senators was not of much help. All of them came under massive pressure from their constituents to do something about the oil embargo. It was evident to her that Kissinger would be the one to orchestrate the coming diplomatic moves and that Israel would have to dance to his tune. Israel had lost its image as the key military factor in the Middle East. She felt this during her meetings with other

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 622–623.

administration figures, the Trade Unions and Jewish leaders. In the past, she had been the dominant personality, this time she was depressed, taciturn and her thoughts focused on other matters. Her fatigue was obvious. Now she spoke on behalf of a people that had just recently survived a dreadful experience, and now, she complained, the administration was trying to teach her a lesson about the new international reality. This time, there were only rare moments of banter. At some point, Golda was exasperated by the attitude of the secretary of state, she turned to him and said: "What do you want from me? I was born in the nineteenth century". Grinning broadly, Kissinger answered: "Madame Prime Minister, the nineteenth century is my specialty". Indeed, he had now begun to construct the layers of a diplomatic arrangement that would be based on similar traits as those that characterized the post-Napoleonic wars in the early years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. There was a dash of Machiavellism of the seventeenth century to which was added the Kissingerism of the twentieth century.

It was agreed that Kissinger would visit the Middle East soon and try to put together an agreement dealing with a strict observation of the cease-fire, ensure the continued supply of the Third Army, there would be prisoners exchange and the presence of a United Nations force. Kissinger would also act to lift the naval blockade and finally call on the parties to return to the lines they held on October 22. This agreement eventually became known as "The Six Points Agreement for the Stabilization of the Cease-Fire". Golda flew home and informed her ministers that the United States had abandoned its previous policy of adhering to the status quo and had now embarked on a new policy that would be characterized by what Kissinger called momentum. There was indeed an urgent need for some progress. On November 6, the nations of the European Economic Community adopted a resolution calling for an Israeli withdrawal to the lines of October 22 and the full implementation of Resolution 242 according to the Arab interpretation. This move strengthened Sadat's hand and weakened Israel's. From now on, Sadat would not accept anything less than what the Europeans were calling for.

There was another visit to the frontline, this one to the Golan Heights. There she was welcomed by General Hoffi, commanding officer of the Northern Front, who told her "not to expect any sensations here", a hint about her recent visit to Sharon. Once again, she met with soldiers and settlers and attempted to explain to them the new situation as she saw it.

When she came home from Washington, and realizing that Israel's position in Europe was eroding, Golda decided to do something at least to salvage Israel's standing among her Socialist colleagues. She phoned Willy Brandt and asked that he convene an urgent meeting of the heads of the Socialist International to discuss the Middle East. A quick poll among its heads led to a meeting

in London on November 11. Prior to leaving for London, Golda went over the final text of the Six Points Agreement. Kissinger flew to Cairo and was given a hero's welcome by Sadat, including hugs and kisses. Both agreed that the diplomatic relations between Egypt and the United States, suspended during the Six Days War, would be resumed at once. Kissinger then obtained Sadat's approval for his grand design. At this stage the goal was to reduce tensions, to insure that the war did not break out again and to involve some UN forces. This would be the basis for additional agreements.

From Cairo, Kissinger despatched two of his senior aides, Joseph Sisco and Harold Saunders, with the proposal to Israel. Golda studied it carefully, showed it to her war cabinet and asked that this agreement be accompanied by an American explanatory note that would include some additional points such as the lifting of the naval blockade in the Red Sea. To avoid what could be seen as caving in to Israeli demands, it was agreed that Kissinger would inform the UN secretary general that both Israel and Egypt had accepted the Six Points Agreement. Once this was done, the document was signed on November 11 by General Yariv for Israel and General Gamazy, the Egyptian chief of staff. The ceremony was held in a tent on kilometer 101 on the Cairo-Suez Road, under the auspices of the commander of the United Nations Forces, the Finnish General Siilasvuo. It was the first agreement signed by Egypt and Israel since the February 1949 Armistice Agreement. Some preliminary discussions regarding the next moves began between Israeli and Egyptian officers at kilometer 101.

The Six Points Agreement did raise some expectations. Yet there remained a major stumbling block—what was the meaning of withdrawal to the lines of October 22 and what was meant by a new concept, that of the separation of forces. The Israeli idea was that it would withdraw all its forces from the western bank of the Canal in return for an Egyptian withdrawal from the eastern bank of the Canal. The Egyptians strenuously objected. This could rob them of all their gains in the war. Instead, the Egyptians called for an Israeli withdrawal to a line running in the middle of Sinai, called the El-Arish Ras Mohamed line. Israel, of course rejected the idea, but this did not prevent the signing of the Six Points Agreement.

The London meeting of the Socialist International was an opportunity for Golda to vent her anger over the behavior of the European countries towards Israel during the war. Golda delivered a speech that was called a "J'Accuse" by one present. In no uncertain terms, she accused the heads of the European nations of caving in to the Arab oil embargo under bogus Soviet threats and castigated them for their refusal to allow the Americans to overfly their territory on their way to Israel.

I just want to understand, in the light of this, what socialism is really about today. Here you are, all of you. Not one inch of your territory was put at our disposal for refueling the planes that saved us from destruction. Now, suppose Richard Nixon had said: 'I am sorry. But since we have nowhere to refuel in Europe, we just can't do anything for you, after all', what would all of you have done then? You know us and who we are. We are all old comrades, long-standing friends. What did you think? On what grounds did you make your decisions not to let those planes refuel? Believe me, I am the last person to belittle the fact that we are only one tiny Jewish state and that there are over twenty Arab states with vast territories, endless oil and billions of dollars. But what I want to know from you today is whether these things are decisive in socialist thinking too?<sup>9</sup>

When she ended her speech, the leaders were speechless. She recalled later that someone behind her said very clearly: "Of course they can't talk. Their throats are choked with oil". Willy Brandt did not remember this phrase, but he was deeply affected by her position that "was accusing, pessimistic and inflexible". She was, he later wrote, utterly depressed.<sup>10</sup> She had all the good reasons for that. Her colleagues in the Socialist International betrayed her and Israel at the worst possible time. On the eve of Knesset elections, this stand could also harm the chances of the Labor Party remaining in power in Israel.

In far way Beijing, Kissinger was holding talks with the Chinese Prime Minister Zhou En Lai to whom he explained on November 11, his Middle East policy. He told the Chinese leader that America sought to convince the Arabs that while they could obtain weapons from the Soviet Union, only the United States could produce a political settlement. He claimed that vast pressure was being exerted on the Nixon administration to help Israel, and that explains why his country was committed to a nation of 2,5 million people in faraway little Israel, with little economic or strategic importance for the United States. He added jokingly: "If Golda gets only 98 % of what she wants, she feels betrayed". He told Zhou that the Israelis were now undergoing a huge trauma. They had assumed that their military superiority would last a long time, yet although they did win in the last war, they had lost their superiority and they needed time to adjust to the new reality. He thought that the importance of the Six Points Agreement was that it was achieved through direct contacts between the United States and Egypt without Soviet involvement.

He revealed to the Chinese leader that negotiations between Israel and the Arabs would commence soon, perhaps as early as December, and that it was impossible to keep the Soviets out. The Americans had already discussed with Egypt and Jordan the idea of a peace conference, something similar to the

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<sup>9</sup> Meir, *My Life*, p. 342.

<sup>10</sup> Willy Brandt, *People and Politics*, Boston, 1978, p. 455.

conference in Paris between the Americans and the North Vietnamese, although he did not anticipate a formal peace conference. He also hoped to involve the Syrians and told Assad that he intended to come to Damascus in December. In the course of such a conference, he anticipated separate talks between Israel and Egypt at the level of foreign ministers. The first part of the conference would deal with separation of forces, therefore there was no need for the Palestinians to attend. They were also a major problem for both Israel and Jordan. The Palestinians would demand an immediate Israeli withdrawal from all the territories and would torpedo the conference. Perhaps, during the second phase of the conference, when final borders would be discussed, the Palestinians would be invited, but only with Jordan's approval. He also reported that Egypt had already given its approval to this arrangement. There was no other option but to invite the Russians.

Kissinger was fully aware that the central issue in any future negotiations on a final settlement would be the future of Jerusalem. He preferred a solution in which the parties involved would share in the administration of the city and even raised the issue before Israeli leaders and proposed that Israel would at least give up the Mosques in the old city. The Israelis said this would create a major problem with the Western wall. To Zhou, he explained that at some point there would be need to deal with the borders, Jerusalem and the Palestinian issue, however since this could take a very long time, at this stage it would be better to focus on the start of a token Israeli withdrawal, something that would give the Arabs both an achievement and the desire to continue the talks. All this was told to the Chinese leader. There is no evidence that he ever discussed these ideas with Golda, Eban or Dinitz.

The Socialist International meeting was over. Golda remained in London for several more hours to hold personal meetings with some of her Socialist colleagues and with the leaders of British Jewry. She saw no reason to extend her visit to London and flew home to prepare for the final phases of the election campaign. So far, the only good news was the signing of the Six Points Agreement. This was the turning point in Israel-Egypt relations, but would it be enough to help in the election campaign, she wondered. The Israeli prisoners came back from Egyptian captivity to a very warm reception. Golda Meir stood at the bottom of the stairs as the prisoners, many of them wounded, hobbled on crutches down the ramp from the Red Cross plane. With tears in her eyes, she hugged and kissed the prisoners as though they were her own children. Those who stood next to her knew that this was not an act—that was how she felt.

Now there was more time to deal with the affairs of the Labor Party, a no less problematic front than the international arena. During the war, there had already been grumbling voices in the Labor Party headquarters on Hayarkon Street in Tel



Aviv, and they grew shriller when the magnitude of the political setback became evident, not to mention the 2,600 dead Israeli soldiers. Even before the war ended formally, the Knesset Labor faction held a discussion on October 24 regarding the implications of the war on the forthcoming elections. Justice Minister Ya'acov Shimshon Shapira thought that the elections should be postponed by a year to enable the public to digest the significance of the events and to think more calmly about who should lead Israel. Others objected and thought that such a long delay would harm the party and enable the Likud to gather more strength while accusing the Alignment of all sins possible. Shapira said that an earthquake had taken place whose outcome could not yet be properly assessed. Besides, he said, Dayan must resign as defense minister. The prime minister could not resign because under Israeli law that would have meant that the entire government was seen as having resigned, something that was unimaginable at this most difficult time. He thought that Dayan's resignation at this time would be seen as an attempt by the Labor Party to demonstrate that it had learned something and was moving in the direction of the acceptance of the principle of personal accountability. But Golda vehemently objected; she summoned Shapira to her office and reprimanded him: "How could you call for Dayan's resignation publicly, and during wartime". He replied that there were times when the child had to be called by its proper name and the public must be told who was responsible for the disaster. Four days later he tendered his resignation and thus became the first political victim of the war that resulted in so many victims.<sup>11</sup>

That was the sign for the beginning of what soon became known as the "Protest Movement". The soldiers began to return from the battlefields, each one with his own harrowing stories and experiences of the lack of preparedness, the blood bath and the sense of helplessness, bordering on despair, in the first days of the war. They spoke of the wars of the generals and bewilderment among the top command. It was not a well-organized movement, but one that crystallized spontaneously among junior ranking officers who came directly from the front and sat in front of the office of the prime minister in Jerusalem holding placards calling for Dayan's resignation. They were headed by a young reserve officer named Motty Ashkenazi who commanded one of the outposts on the Suez Canal, one that held intact during the war. The number of protesters steadily grew as more officers and soldiers joined them, still in battle uniforms, unshaven, tired and angry. Golda could not fail but see them whenever she traveled to and from her office in the government center in Jerusalem. Behind this movement stood no political party that could be held responsible for this new phenomenon.

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<sup>11</sup> Ben-Porat, *Conversations*, pp. 182–197.

The demand was simple and catchy—Dayan must go. The movement grew with the arrival of hundreds of new soldiers, each one with his personal story. These were the finest sons of Israel, the most dedicated and loyal to the country. This was the 1967 generation, people who had fought in the two wars, people who came to believe that their leaders and government had lost the moral authority to continue in office since they failed in their duty. It was a loud noninstitutionalized movement that did not ask for higher wages, better working conditions or housing. It was a demonstration of an entire generation that called on its leaders to take on themselves the responsibility for the *mechdal* and resign. Apart from Motty Ashkenazi who was the first to raise the standard against Dayan, the movement lacked recognized leaders, but it reminded the leadership that there was urgent need to undertake drastic measures to bring about a change in the cabinet and in the functioning of the government. For this, Golda was physically and emotionally unprepared. She was too busy with the negotiations with Kissinger and indirectly with the Egyptians, with the issue of the prisoners in Syria, with the soldiers missing in action—over 80 in Sinai alone. Her mind was not attuned to deal with these young people. She may have hoped that they would demonstrate for several days, vent their anger and then go home. She failed to understand their strength and determination. When some went home to shower and rest, their places were taken up by scores of others.

Israelis wondered if Dayan would draw the right conclusion and resign. Golda was the one who bolstered his morale. Each time when he came to her and offered to tend his resignation, she persuaded him to wait. To her aides she said: “The ‘street’ would not dictate to me what to do”. She still believed in an orderly political process. She may have ironically recalled that it was the same “street” that put Dayan in the cabinet in May 1967 that was now calling for his head. She failed utterly to assess the mood of the country. Her aides were not of much help—they too, misunderstood the demands of the protest movement. They did not realize that the protesters really meant that Dayan had to go to be followed by the rest. Golda entrenched herself in her office, but the signs hurt her deeply. She knew the young people were honest and genuine and that their motives and feelings were pure.

The two large parties decided that elections would be held on December 31, two months after the original date. It was a correct decision, but another decision turned out to be highly mistaken. Both parties decided that their list of candidates would not be changed to reflect the new reality. For Likud it was easy: one of its leaders, Arik Sharon, was a war hero since he was seen as the one who led the crossing of the Canal. Labor had a much more complicated problem because the public had now come to identify all of its leaders with the disaster. Some of the party leaders, led by Lova Eliav, thought this was a grave error. How could

the party appeal to the voter when its list was adorned with the names of Golda, Dayan, Allon, Galili and even Sapir and Eban. The tired leadership had no energy, patience or heart to reopen the list. Golda expressed satisfaction that the list did include some new faces: Rabin, Yariv and Bar-Lev. The voices of protest became shriller and their participants called on Labor to change this decision, but to no avail.

During the war, Golda had already promised that in due course a state commission of inquiry would be appointed to investigate the events that preceded the war and the conduct of the IDF leadership and that of the entire defense establishment in its early days. On November 18, the cabinet approved the establishment of such a commission under the Inquiry Commissions Law. It would be headed by the president of the Supreme Court Justice Shimon Agranat, and among its members were the two former IDF chiefs of staff Yadin and Laskov, Supreme Court Justice Moshe Landau and the State Comptroller Yitzhak Nebenzhal. If Golda had hoped that this news would cool off the atmosphere and reduce the size of the demonstrations, she was wrong. The protesters remained in place in front of the Prime Minister's Office, day and night in the cold and rainy Jerusalem winter. Her nerves were frayed.

In the midst of these domestic developments, the regional and international arenas were also boiling. Following the signing of the Six Point Agreement, Israeli and Egyptian officers continued to meet at kilometer 101. It appeared as though they would reach certain understandings on a variety of issues. When Kissinger heard this, he became alarmed. Progress resulting from direct Egyptian-Israeli negotiations could make America's involvement marginal. He therefore decided to scuttle these talks and later wrote that although the talks with the Egyptians were important for the Meir government and could lead to a breakthrough at kilometer 101, then why Geneva?<sup>12</sup> It was noted that in the course of the war and certainly in November, he had already begun to lay the foundations for an international peace conference in Geneva, under the sponsorship of the United States and the Soviet Union. The conference would be convened by the UN secretary general. The countries to be invited to Geneva to present their case would be Israel, Egypt, Jordan, Syria and Lebanon. There was a question what to do about a Palestinian representation, although Kissinger knew well that Israel would never agree to this. After making broad opening statements, the main topic to be discussed would be a separation of forces, something that Kissinger had already promised to Sadat in return for Egypt's agreement to the peace conference. Kissinger rightly thought that Israel would attend in order to show to the rest of the world that it

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<sup>12</sup> Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, p. 752; Spiegel, *The Other Arab-Israel Conflict*, pp. 270–271.

was interested in peace and to show to the Israelis that something was moving. This would also help the Labor Party election campaign. The Soviets, too, pressured Egypt to stop the talks at kilometer 101. Therefore, the Geneva conference seemed to be an adequate solution. Kissinger and Gromyko agreed to hold the conference close to December 18–19.

Before the diplomats of those countries involved could hammer out the final details of the conference, an Arab summit conference was held in Algiers in the last week of November. The participants sent their congratulations to the Egyptian and Syrian armies and praised their battlefield performance. They also reached a number of secret decisions. Their conditions for cease-fire and later for peace would be total Israeli withdrawal from all the occupied areas including East Jerusalem and the restoration of the full national rights of the Palestinians. As long as these terms would not fulfilled, there was no ground to believe that there would be a real change in the situation which they described as on the verge of another explosion. It was a clear signal to Egypt and Jordan not to dare and engage in separate direct or indirect talks with Israel. Syria, in any case, displayed very limited enthusiasm over its participation in the conference, because unlike Egypt, the Americans did not promise Syria a separation of forces agreement. Syria had no incentive to go to Geneva in defiance of the Arab summit decisions. Israel told the United States that unless there were negotiations with Syria, there would be no withdrawal on the Golan Heights.

Golda watched these developments with growing alarm. As always, she was terrified of plots, of schemes and conspiracies that were being hatched behind her back between Kissinger and the Arab leaders. Another reason for her concern was the Arab demand that at a certain time the Palestinians would be invited to Geneva. She interpreted this to mean that the PLO could come to Geneva. Israel objected to this strenuously and said not only the heads of the PLO, but even if non-PLO Palestinian leaders traveled to Geneva, Israel would boycott the conference. She also wanted to know what would be the role of the United Nations. Golda did not want a discussion on substantive matters in Geneva. Her preference was a discussion on general principles, something that Kissinger wanted as well. The conference would thus focus on arrangements to reach an Israeli-Egyptian separation of forces agreement, whose details would be worked on by a joint Israeli-Egyptian team. Now it was Kissinger's turn to be alarmed. He realized that the Israeli interest in Geneva was unenthusiastic to say the least, and as usual he mobilized President Nixon to assure that this event would be considered a major American diplomatic achievement. Nixon badly needed foreign policy achievements. The Watergate Affair was seriously eroding his position at home. Every day there were new revelations that threatened to undermine not only Nixon personally but the very presidency as well. Nixon did not have much patience with

Golda and sent her a terse letter in which he stated his unequivocal position: if Israel did not take a positive attitude toward her participation in the conference on the basis of the letter that Israel and the United States worked on together, this would not be understood in the United States or in the rest of the world and he would not be able to justify the consistent assistance America gave Golda's government on behalf of their joint interests.<sup>13</sup>

The letter he mentioned was the letter of invitation to be issued by Waldheim to the participants of the conference that determined its procedures. Golda was determined to fight over every word. She wanted to know exactly who the sponsors were, who would invite, who would be invited, what would be the seating arrangements, what would be the agenda. Before Kissinger left Washington on his way to various Middle East capitals and then to Geneva, there was not yet an agreement on the formulations of the letter of invitation, and all this had to be negotiated in five days before the convening of the conference.

In the midst of those dreary days, another blow fell on Israel: on December 1, Ben-Gurion died, ten days after he suffered a stroke. One of the last letters he wrote was to Golda, in which he thanked her for her greetings on his 87<sup>th</sup> birthday. He was moved that even in the midst of war she had not forgotten his birthday. He also told her to stand fast in the war. Ben-Gurion's death was highly symbolic. The heroic era of Israel had ended with the passing of the founding father himself, and this at the most difficult time for Israel. Of that group one remained, Golda Meir, and she was almost at the end of her road. She was the first to pass by the coffin of the dead leader in the Knesset Plaza, and with other leaders flew by helicopter to the simple funeral in Sede Boker, where Ben-Gurion was put to rest next to his wife Paula, facing the desert that he so loved. During the funeral, Golda did not move, she was deep in thoughts about the great man she had first met 57 years earlier in Milwaukee. She recalled the friendship, the victories and the bitter struggles. What remained was the image of Ben-Gurion who as she often said had been "the greatest Jew of our generation". Now she was the last one who survived of that group that had traveled such a long way. She could barely leave the gravesite to make her way back to Jerusalem. No one wanted to disturb her.

In early December, she made an effort to restore a semblance of order in her party. She realized that the call for Dayan's resignation had now spread to the Labor Party. She was furious—"how can they do it on the eve of a peace conference?" The public did not share her view. The Labor Party was torn within. On December 5, Golda decided to force the issue when she appeared before the Central Committee of the party. In her remarks she talked first about the war:

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<sup>13</sup> Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, p. 759.

I too can find excuses, why in the face of such certainty by Aman (military intelligence) and the evaluations of other military figures, it would have been illogical for me to have insisted on a call-up. But I should have heeded the warnings of my heart and order the call-up. I know I had to do so, and this knowledge will be with me for the rest of my life. I will never be the person I was before the Yom Kippur War. And now a final word that I must say for the sake of fairness and amity. I said earlier that if someone has to bear parliamentary responsibility—I see myself as first and foremost responsible for this. I have been criticized for my television appearance—to the extent I appeared since the end of the war...that it was not good for the morale of the people, that I looked so sad. To start using cosmetics at my age? I would have done so, had I known it would help. But I am realistic in these matters and I cannot put on a mask. I am sad, like everyone else, plus something else: the fact that I am the prime minister. And I cannot say that I did not have the intelligence... And I know that comrades come, military men, generals in the present and generals in the past, and tell me, you are a fool. I accept that. But when they explain to me—and I really want with all my heart to accept this because it is logical. In the discussions there were military men par excellence, successful. That was the assessment, and you had to decide differently? It's true. But no one told me that I should propose something else. I did not because I thought it was really so. There was a fatal error in the evaluation of the intelligence we had. I flay myself a lot. I am not in the mood to say, me? After all, who am I?<sup>14</sup>

At the end of her speech, she demanded a vote of confidence. She won by a majority of 291 against 33 (15 abstained). She then insisted that the Central Committee also approve the party's peace plan that included 11 points, in which the Geneva Conference was described as a central event in the history of the Middle East. The plan also included a call for peace in secure borders based on territorial compromise to ensure the Jewish character of Israel. A call for the return to the 1967 borders was rejected and it was stated that the Palestinian identity would be realized in the framework of a Jordanian-Palestinian state alongside Israel. The party called for interim agreements and for withdrawals, if so required, from the present cease-fire lines as interim arrangements on the road to peace. Once again, this was the handiwork of the deft Yisrael Galili. As expected, the Likud criticized this program which it thought was an invitation to a broader withdrawal that would sow the seeds of the next war.

Kissinger arrived on December 16 and a five-hour discussion ensued. First, there was a private meeting with the prime minister and then the Israeli negotiating team entered the room. It consisted of Meir, Eban, Allon, Dayan, Dinitz, Gazit and their aides. The issue of the letter of invitation was quickly settled. Golda, who initially opposed a UN invitation, changed her mind after Kissinger told her that if the Soviet Union was not one of the signatories of the letter of invitation, that could derail the conference. He explained in detail the procedure which would

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<sup>14</sup> Labor Party Central Committee, 5 December 1973; see also Nakdimon, *Low Probability*.

be mostly ceremonial. The chairman would be the secretary general of the United Nations. The letter of invitation would say that the parties had agreed that the conference would be under the joint sponsorship of the United States and the Soviet Union. They also agreed that the issue of the participation of additional parties from the Middle East would be discussed during the first phase of the conference. Israel insisted and Kissinger accepted that all this would be accompanied by an American Memorandum of Understanding in which the United States would veto an invitation to the Palestinians and would oppose any attempt to amend Resolution 242. The next item was the issue of the Israeli prisoners of war in Syria, now that all the prisoners held by the Egyptians had come back.

This matter weighed heavily on Golda. The families of the prisoners demanded that the government at least obtain a list of names. Golda had met with the families on a number of occasions and knew their feelings. She personally knew some of the prisoners and the parents of at least two had worked in the Foreign Ministry while she was the foreign minister. Dayan proposed that Israel would not go to Geneva unless the Syrians agreed at least to visits by representatives of the International Red Cross. Golda rejected the idea and agreed with Kissinger that the issue of prisoners should be dealt with separately from the political agenda. Israel's minimal demand was to obtain the names of the prisoners according to the Geneva Convention. Kissinger, who had seen Assad several days earlier, told the Israelis that Assad was neither overly interested in nor was he influenced by the Geneva Convention and had reminded Kissinger that the United States had conducted talks with the North Vietnamese long before Hanoi had handed a list of prisoners. Kissinger asked for some Israeli gestures towards the Syrians in the form of allowing some villagers in the Salient to return to their villages or the handing over of positions on Mt. Hermon the UN, but to no avail. Kissinger reported that Assad would be ready to hand over the list of names only at the conclusion of talks on separation of forces, and the prisoners themselves only once the agreement had been fully implemented. Here, Golda jumped from her seat and declared that there would be no separation of forces negotiations before they got the list. There would be nothing. They would not sit in the same room with the Syrians who were torturing and slaughtering their men. This was elementary, morally or not, this was fundamental. If Assad got everything he wanted, what would remain for the negotiations.<sup>15</sup> Finally, Israel gave Kissinger green light to tell the Syrians that Israel would be ready to enter into separation of forces negotiations and that its position in the talks would be logical. On December 18 this became academic, when Assad announced that Syria would not attend the

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<sup>15</sup> Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, pp. 789–791.

Geneva Conference. That meant that Lebanon would not attend either. Everyone heaved a sigh of relief. The Israel cabinet approved the participation in the Geneva Conference and then went over every word and comma of Eban's opening statement at the conference.

For the Israel Labor Party, the Geneva Conference came like a gift from heaven. Now it could argue that there had been an opening and the same team must continue to lead the country. If another government was elected, there could be a stalemate inevitably leading to another war. Kissinger understood the situation well when he wrote to Nixon on December 19 that the Israelis were now beginning to understand the new reality. If Labor won enough support, at least the door could remain open. Israel could not permit itself another war of attrition but could also not expect a decisive victory. Victory of the right in Israel could seriously complicate America's peace efforts. He then suggested to Nixon to continue the sea lift to Israel which he saw as absolutely vital.<sup>16</sup>

Before leaving Jerusalem for Geneva, Golda insisted that Kissinger visit Yad Vashem, something he had been resisting. He sent the journalists that normally accompanied him to the airport and with a small number of aides went to Yad Vashem. There he was shown the Book of the Communities, compiled by Yad Vashem which contains the names of those who perished in the Holocaust. He was shown the Book of Furth where he had been born, and discovered a number of Kissingers listed. Deeply moved, he said that he now understood and respected the fears of the Israelis over the peacemaking process. On the way to Geneva, he kept silent for a number of hours, highly unusual for him. Later myths said that during the talks, Kissinger complained that when he visited Cairo, he was received as a hero with hugs and kisses, while in Israel he was greeted by demonstrations. Golda replied that had she been Egyptian, she would have also greeted him with kisses. She realized that Kissinger was now a most welcomed visitor at Sadat's many palaces.

Israel wanted the Geneva conference to be held as close to the elections as possible. Initially there was talk it would start on December 18. Waldheim then suggested Friday and Saturday December 21–22. That could create some problems with Israel's orthodox parties. But the event was too important and Israel Television carried it live on Saturday. There were no surprises. Each side performed as orchestrated and delivered a flowery speech. The Russians even invited Eban for dinner with Gromyko, but there was no breakthrough on the issue of restoring diplomatic relations between Moscow and Jerusalem. The outcome was a closing statement read by Waldheim that established the Geneva Conference Peace

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1250.



Making Mechanism, under whose auspices Israel and Egypt would conduct the talks for separation of forces. These talks began in Geneva on December 26, and Israel was represented by General Gur, the IDF military attaché in Washington. Later, the expert on elections in Israel, Finance Minister Pinchas Sapir, estimated that the Geneva Conference was worth five Knesset seats for Labor.

In the week that remained before the elections, the Labor Party leaders made a huge effort to return the initiative to their hands. However, the campaign was mute, tens of thousands of voters were still in the army in Egypt and on the Golan Heights and could not attend rallies. The Labor Party leaders had to overcome a major problem—how would they explain the fact that the same leaders who had served in the past would continue in the future? What would they tell the depressed Israelis? What could they promise the voter? How would they justify what happened on October 6? At the end of the day, they relied on the fear of the Israeli voter of the radical left and especially the radical right. They spread fear that if Labor lost, that could have very serious implications on the future of Israeli-American relations and on the negotiations that had barely started. The key unknown factor was: how would the soldiers vote. The outcome of the elections hinged on their votes and no one was prepared to bet on how they would react.

On December 31, Golda voted in her polling station at the Hebrew Gymnasium in the Rehavia quarter of Jerusalem and went back to her office. In the afternoon, she was driven to the party headquarters in Tel Aviv to await the results. Golda sat next to her sister Clara and her biographer Marie Syrkin who later wrote that unlike her comrades, she sat quietly, almost not moving, and tense as she watched the television screen that showed the results. As was her habit, she occasionally made some loud comments. When it appeared that the Likud won the mayoralty of Tel Aviv, she said in Hebrew “*chaval*—a pity”. When someone made snide remarks about the trio Golda-Galili-Dayan she uttered: “A trio with Begin would be better”?<sup>17</sup> Her anger was reserved to the head of the Labor Campaign Headquarters Avraham Offer. Even before the results were known, he gave an interview to Israel Television in which he said that if Labor got less than 50 seats in the Knesset, he was not sure it would be able to form a stable government and perhaps there would be need for repeat elections. This annoyed Golda, who instructed the Party Secretary Aharon Yadlin to say the following: “I assume that the task of forming the new cabinet would be given to us on the basis of the agreed basic guidelines. That meant that the existing coalition would continue. There had been no historic turning point, there is a basis for forming a government in Israel and there is no need for new elections”. The results showed that Labor was

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<sup>17</sup> Marie Syrkin, “Golda Meir after the Yom Kippur War”, *The Jewish Frontier*, March 1974.

still the dominant party, but it lost five seats in the Knesset and the representation of the Labor-Mapan Alignment in the Knesset was now 51. The Likud increased their strength to 39, having received many votes from the soldiers. The Religious parties preserved their strength and the surprise of the elections was the new party of Shulamit Allony that won three seats.

Israel was not yet ready to toss Labor overboard. This would happen four years later. The elections did send Labor a strong warning that it was no longer the permanent dominant factor in Israeli politics. The public felt that it had paid a very heavy price for the errors committed by the leadership, starting with the events that led to the outbreak of the Yom Kippur War and ending with the series of vague arrangements that followed it which placed in doubt the fruits of the military achievements. Israel was now more isolated than ever, increasingly dependent on the United States and all that meant in terms of Israel's ability to maneuver diplomatically and militarily.

Shortly after the election results were published, President Efraim Katsir summoned the heads of all the parties for consultations, at the conclusion of which he charged Golda with the task of forming the next cabinet, and she accepted. If she had any doubts whether that was the right time to resign and hand over the task of prime minister to someone else, the scene she saw around her dissuaded her from doing so. The entire leadership was stained by the Yom Kippur War, including the doves Sapir and Eban. All the others—Golda, Dayan, Galili and Allon—were the principal decision makers. There remained Yitzhak Rabin, but for some reason he was not given any meaningful role to play in the war, a fact that surprised quite a few in Israel. Bar-Lev was not yet considered a national figure. Perhaps Golda thought she would put together a new-old cabinet, continue the separation of forces negotiations with Egypt, and perhaps later even with Syria. This could hopefully improve the national mood, and then she would hand in her resignation. But before she was able to begin to construct her cabinet, she fell ill. The inhuman effort of the recent weeks finally took its toll on her. The miracle was that she did not collapse earlier, a testimony to her enormous willpower. This time she was diagnosed with herpes zoster, a very painful disease that affected the edges of the nerves in the waist. For the first time in her career, she authorized her spokesman to issue a statement about her health. She realized that this time, the public had the right to know the state of her health in order to prevent baseless rumors that were already circulating in Israel and abroad that she had a recurrence of cancer. It is plausible that the Protest Movement also affected her health in addition to her mood. Not only had it not abated, but intensified when it was clear that the entire leadership would remain at their previous posts. Before falling sick, she testified a number of times before the Agranat Commission. The transcripts were made public only thirty years later.

In Geneva, the joint Israel-Egyptian team began to draw up models of separation (also called disengagement) of forces. Soon the talks foundered. This did not surprise Kissinger, who may have secretly hoped they would, as he then would be called upon to rescue them. This was the background for the first “shuttle” that began in the second week of January 1974. At the end of December, Dayan had already presented some ideas in Washington about what the separation of forces should look like. He repeated them on January 3, 1974. They included a number of principles: Egypt would be allowed to retain the territory it captured on the east bank of the Canal, while Israel would withdraw from the entire area west of the Canal that it occupied at the end of the war, an area nicknamed by Israelis as “Africa” or the “Land of Goshen”. A disengagement of forces zone would be established, monitored by United Nations forces that would include areas of limited armament and military personnel. This zone would be the barrier between the armies and would help the Egyptians clear the Canal and prepare it for renewed navigation. Egypt would also begin to rehabilitate the destroyed cities along the Canal and bring back most of their inhabitants who had fled during the War of Attrition. All this would reduce Egypt’s interest to renew the war. For its part, Israel would gain a much-needed period of respite, could begin to demobilize tens of thousands of reserve soldiers who had been in uniform for over three months and thus ease the pressure on its badly-hurt economy because of the long military service of so many soldiers. It would also help strengthen Israel-America ties and ensure continued supply of weapons. Also, a wedge between Egypt and Syria would be created. The negotiations focused on the depth of the withdrawal of the Egyptians and the number of weapons and personnel the Egyptians would be allowed to maintain near the buffer zones. Problems that had to be dealt with also included the role and authority of the United Nations force and what to do in case of violations.<sup>18</sup>

Israel did not conceal the fact that the agreement was vital for her. It would help the wounds to heal and allow the new government to start thinking of a similar agreement with Syria. Israel would gain a long period of quiet that would help her people make the necessary adjustment to the new situation. It would also help Nixon achieve an impressive foreign policy achievement at the time he badly needed it. It seemed as though his presidency was on the verge of collapse. On the Golan Heights, a war of attrition was continuing causing Israel a number of casualties. Since all parties knew that sooner or later negotiations for a separation of forces agreement regarding the Golan Heights would take place, the question was when they would start, how long they would take and where the

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18 Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, p. 800; Dayan, *Milestones*, pp. 692–695.

new lines would be. The separation of forces agreement with Egypt was to serve as the model for the Syrian one.

The meetings of the Israeli team were held without Golda, although she was fully briefed at home. She soon recovered and was in good health to receive the US secretary of state who arrived in Jerusalem on January 12 at her residence. Once again, an argument broke out. While Kissinger gave her a long expose of the new international situation and Israel's tough choices, an impatient Golda wanted to know exactly the depth of the Israeli withdrawal in Sinai, what the Egyptian *quid pro quo* would be and what would be the American commitments in case of violations. At this stage, Sadat wanted an Israeli commitment for total withdrawal, which Israel could not give him. In a heated discussion, she again doubted Sadat's sincerity and desire for peace and opposed the idea of withdrawal. Once she calmed down, she wanted to hear more about Sadat from Kissinger, who was happy to oblige. She did not delve into military and technical details, how many tanks, how many pieces of artillery and what would be their range, this she left to the experts—Dayan, Dado and Allon. In the coming week, Kissinger shuttled between Jerusalem and Aswan, where Sadat had his winter home. He was persistent and devious, but he achieved results. His method was simple: he would never act simply as a messenger; rather he would give each side his impressions of what the other side was prepared to do. This method made it easier for the parties either to accept or reject the demands of the other side.

Patience, he wove the agreement that was approved by the Israeli cabinet on January 17. Very early the next morning, at 6 am while Jerusalem was covered by a rare snow storm, Kissinger arrived at the residence of the prime minister, accompanied by his usual retinue of diplomats and journalists. He brought with him a written message from Sadat. Golda read it with great excitement. The Egyptian president wrote that “you must take my word seriously. We never had contact, now we have the services of Dr. Kissinger, let us use them and talk one to the other through him”. Her response after reading the note was: “This is good. Why is he doing it?” Yet she said that the signing of the Separation of Forces Agreement was a highly historic and important event. She then handed Kissinger her reply, in which she had written that she was fully aware of the significance of the message received by the prime minister of Israel from the president of Egypt and expressed hope that the contacts through Kissinger would continue. She praised his letter to her and promised that for her part, she would do everything to create trust and mutual understanding. “Our nations need and deserve peace. I am convinced that we must direct all our efforts and powers to the goal of peace. I repeat what you wrote: When I talk about a durable peace between us, I mean it.”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> For the text of the letter see Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, p. 844.

She went over the agreement and signed the American proposal on the thinning out of forces and armaments. The ceremony included some other speeches and a telephone call from Nixon. Kissinger watched her with admiration. Later, he would write: “I always felt a deep tenderness toward her. She had held her country together in dire crisis, at times defied its only friend. She had been converted only reluctantly to a negotiating process against which all her instincts rebelled. But she had known when to conclude an agreement with dignity and self-confidence that Israel remained in control of its destiny in peace as in war”.<sup>20</sup>

From her residence, the secretary took the train to the airport, now renamed Ben-Gurion International Airport. Dado took off by helicopter to kilometer 101, where he signed the agreement at noon with General Gamazy signing for Egypt.<sup>21</sup> A new era began, yet Golda had an eerie feeling: could Sadat be trusted? This feeling would remain with her to her dying day. The fear, suspicion and mistrust were too deeply ingrained in her to overcome them, at this late stage of her life, after a bloody war. She did not know that the moment the agreement was being signed by the two chiefs of staff, Kissinger handed Sadat her letter in Aswan. In a symbolic act, Sadat took off his uniform and said he would only don it again on ceremonial occasions. He asked Kissinger to tell Golda that this was his reply to her letter. Eight years later, in full uniform, Sadat was assassinated by Egyptian radicals as he reviewed a military parade to commemorate the eighth anniversary of the Yom Kippur War which the Egyptians referred to as the October War. His assassins were radicals who opposed any agreement with Israel, whose foundations were laid by Golda and Sadat in those days in January 1974.

If anyone had illusions that a period of quiet had begun, he was wrong. Golda now faced some very heavy chores: constructing her cabinet, negotiating a disengagement agreement with the Syrians and waiting for the findings of the Agranat Commission. The first chore was far more complicated than she thought. It was accompanied by many voices that were determined to prevent Dayan from continuing as defense minister. The voices became shriller and the demonstrations in front of her office more intense. One day, driving to her office, she noted a placard hoisted by an elderly man: “My son did not fall in battle. He was murdered and the murderers are sitting in the Kiryah.” As the criticism mounted, Dayan was determined not to resign. A stalemate ensued. Golda was even considering the possibility of heading a minority government based on 54 Labor and Independent Liberals votes. But her party rejected the idea. The country needed a broad-based government so as not to be exposed to internal pressures.

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<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 840.

<sup>21</sup> For the text of the agreement see Medzini, Documents, pp. 1110–1111.

Some Mapai veterans still suspected that Dayan and Peres had made a secret pact with the Likud and the Religious parties. To pacify the National Religious Party, Golda made a commitment that if a peace agreement was reached between Israel and Jordan requiring an Israeli withdrawal in the West Bank, she would hold new elections to seek approval for such a move. She did not think of a referendum but national elections. She never liked the concept of referendum, she never trusted the masses.

It turned out that the opposition to Dayan staying on as defense minister was not limited to the heads of the Labor Party. It spilled over and reached the highest echelons of the IDF. On February 12, 1974, Golda attended a meeting of the Supreme Command, all officers above the rank of colonel, called to discuss the war and its consequences. On the second day of the meeting, a colonel rose and openly attacked the defense minister: “We were taught in the Palmach and in the IDF that there is someone who holds the top responsibility. The defense minister is responsible for the IDF and thus responsible for what happened. He must draw the conclusions and go”.<sup>22</sup> Such a statement verged on mutiny. Golda and Dado remained silent. Dayan protested to the chief of staff. He may have hoped that at least Golda would remain loyal to him, but she preferred to remain silent. The rebellious officer was not allowed to participate in the rest of the meeting, “by order”, explained Dado to those assembled there. News of the incident leaked to the media and added oil to the fire.

On February 18, Dayan reached the conclusion that he could not join the new government and that Rafi would have to find a replacement for him. He also called for the replacement of the chief of staff and the end of the campaign against him in the Labor Party. He told his supporters that they had to know that he always had the option of going with the Likud. On February 26, he told a Rafi meeting in Jerusalem: “We have reached the point when a responsible person cannot serve as minister of defense”. Peres decided that if Dayan went, he must join him and then Rafi would be out of the next government. Golda was desperate. On February 24, she sent a note to Peres: “Shimon, regrettably, Moshe does not see himself outside the post (as defense minister), I am desperate to such an extent no one can imagine”. In a stormy meeting of the Labor Party Central Committee, she erupted and told Dayan and Peres: “You have no right to go, not at this time and not from your positions”.<sup>23</sup>

Dayan realized that by his obstinacy, he was in fact preventing Golda from forming the next cabinet, but that did not bother him too much. He claimed that

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<sup>22</sup> Nakdimon, *Low Probability*, p. 274.

<sup>23</sup> Golani, Peres, p. 149; see also Bar-Zohar, Phoenix, and Dayan, *Milestones*.

the Labor Party leadership had become a field tribunal, and Golda agreed with him. Their positions became closer in those days. She knew that much of the assault against Dayan was aimed at her, but Dayan was an easier target than the “old lady” because her standing in the public was still strong. She knew that if Dayan had to leave the cabinet, she would be bound to follow. In a tense meeting of the party leadership, she lashed out at her comrades: “I have sinned in that in the past forty-five years I have allowed myself to be a whitewasher. Under the pressure of the comrades and my own I thought there is something to do in this country and that by placing Golda at the top, they would overcome internal confrontations. That period is now over. The trick of Golda the whitewasher is no longer of any help. That’s over.” But Dayan was adamant and said that he would not join the cabinet.<sup>24</sup>

At the end of February, Golda had another thought. A replacement could be found for Dayan—Yitzhak Rabin. His choice was highly logical and sensible. He was the Six Days War chief of staff, a very successful ambassador in Washington, he knew well the key personalities in America, and above all—his name was not tainted by the Yom Kippur War. She offered him the position which he readily accepted. For one day, he was defense minister designate. But this arrangement did not last long. On the day that should have been Dayan’s last day in the Defense Ministry, he probably had second thoughts. He and Peres went to see Golda and told her that news had just come in of Syrian moves that could mean an escalation on the northern front. Therefore, they decided to remain in the cabinet. She was delighted and burst into tears, saying, “this is the best gift I could ask for”. She never bothered to doublecheck this bit of information. Rabin later wrote in his memoirs that he was too naïve to think that the offer she made him to become defense minister was intended to be a red sheet so that Dayan would remain in the cabinet. The public was not misled. Eban said that he could not find even a dozen Israelis who took the Syrian threat seriously. But for the time being, the crisis was averted.<sup>25</sup>

When the Labor Party Knesset faction met on March 3, 1974, to approve the makeup of the new cabinet in which Rabin would be minister of labor, Peres minister of information and Yariv minister of transport, there was vast criticism on the manner in which this cabinet was constituted and there was almost unanimity that its days were numbered. Golda replied to her many critics and suddenly she stunned all present by saying: “This evening I shall go to the president,

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<sup>24</sup> In the Knesset Labor Party faction, 25 February 1974.

<sup>25</sup> Rabin, *Service Book*, pp. 411–412; Eban, *Autobiography*, p. 566; Dayan, *Milestones*, pp. 734–735.

because I have completed my task of forming the government and I shall return the mandate to him. I hope you will find a way to tell the president who should be the next candidate to put together the cabinet". She took her handbag and went home. She had hardly arrived at her residence when the traditional parade began. They found her sitting in front of her television set making snide remarks whenever a Likud politician was interviewed. As long as the news program was on, no one dared to bother her. Then she was ready to hear what they had to say. Among those who came to plead with her was Rabin, who was a political novice who could not hide his embarrassment. To his colleagues who came with him he said: "You have more experience in these matters, go and talk to her". The persuasion effort lasted a long time, and only after the pleaders swore that they would collaborate with her and cease their criticism did she relent. She was finally persuaded to remove her threat. A sigh of relief could have been felt—until the next time.

Golda's last cabinet was presented to the Knesset on March 10, 1974, and won the confidence of 62 votes. 46 voted against while three abstained. Among them were Aryeh Lova Eliav and Yitzhak Ben-Aharon. Golda was deeply hurt and never forgot or forgave them. From the start it was obvious that this cabinet would tread water until the publication of the Agranat Commission initial report. The ministers went through their motions as though nothing had happened. The Protest Movement was still demanding that Dayan be fired. It was in such an atmosphere that Golda and Dayan went to the military cemetery on Mount Herzl in Jerusalem, on a cold, windy and rainy morning, for the annual commemoration of the soldiers whose burial site was unknown. It was there that they were greeted by the calls of "Murderers, Killers".

Time was running out. The event in the cemetery shook Golda to the core, but she continued to function. She would never run away from the battlefield, certainly not now, on the eve of negotiations for a disengagement of forces with Syria. She continued to meet with the families of the prisoners and those missing in action to lift their spirits and to gain some encouragement from them. She knew she owed them a debt of honor. Until she left office, and the decision apparently was made in those days, she would do all in her power to bring back the prisoners and find out what happened to those missing in action. Kissinger came back to Israel at the end of February and brought the list compiled by the Red Cross that told Israel for the first time since October who was alive and who was not. Deeply moved, Golda received the list together with the chief of staff. Kissinger described the event as follows:<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, p. 961.



Kissinger: Let me first get to the immediate problem. Here is the list. Its in Arabic.

Golda: There are 65.

Kissinger: Yes.

Golda: Are they all alive?

Kissinger: Yes, we've been assured they are all alive. The Red Cross visits will start this morning. They will contact us tomorrow.

Golda: We must not lose a minute. I met the families the other night. I prepared everything in case Dr. Kissinger received the list. We shall take it to Tel Aviv for translation and the parents would know within two hours.

Dado walked out of the residence with tear in his eyes. 65 were alive, but the fate of some 20 others was still unknown. Now there remained the task of informing the families, most of whom would be relieved, the others would begin to mourn. Once this hurdle was overcome and Israel's demand was met, it was agreed with Kissinger that the disengagement talks with the Syrians would begin at the end of April and be conducted along the lines of the Egyptian model, namely a series of shuttles by Kissinger from Jerusalem to Damascus and back.

On April 1 the Agranat Commission finally published its preliminary report. A group of ministers was called to Golda's office to read both the findings and the recommendations and were stunned. Among them were Galili, Bar-Lev, Yariv and Rabin. Of this group, Rabin was visibly shaken up. The political echelon was totally exonerated and cleared of all responsibility which was placed squarely on the IDF. It was obvious that Dado would have to resign. Golda and Galili were curious to read what the Commission would say about Dayan and were disappointed. When it came to Golda, the Commission said:

Golda Meir acted correctly in the critical days that preceded the outbreak of the war. Immediately after returning from abroad, she met with the deputy prime minister, the defense minister, the minister without portfolio Galili and the chief of staff to discuss mainly the situation on the Golan Heights. At the end of the consultations, she decided to inform the cabinet in its next regular meeting due to be held on 7 October. On Friday, 5 October, she decided on the basis of disturbing information that reached her to summon all the ministers who were in Tel Aviv on that day. In that meeting, the ministers asked the prime minister and the defense minister to decide on a call-up, if needed in the course of Yom Kippur...

On the morning of Yom Kippur, she decided wisely, with common sense and speedily, in favor of the full mobilization of the reserves, as recommended by the chief of staff despite weighty political considerations, thereby performing a most important service for the defense of the state...<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Agranat Commission Report, Tel Aviv, 1975.

Golda knew well that her and Dayan's exoneration by the Agranat Commission, and above all, the resignation of the chief of staff, would raise a storm of protest in the country and that her days as prime minister were numbered. She failed to understand why Dayan was cleared while the entire blame was placed on Dado. In a cabinet meeting, Rabin proposed that the report be returned to the Commission for additional review. But this was rejected. The next day, Golda summoned the chief of staff and handed him the report and asked him to take and read it and then come back to her. He read it in his room at the "King David" Hotel in Jerusalem and went back to her that evening. With her was Galili. Dado said that he assumed she would ask him to resign. Her answer was positive and he tendered his resignation in a cabinet meeting the next day. Golda praised him profusely and she meant every word: "None of us would forget your contribution to the state security for decades, until the end of the last war and its results. There was always a sense in the government that we are lucky this man is the IDF commander...with a heavy and painful heart we take our leave of you, at such time that is the most difficult for a man like you. You must know that each one of us is with you. You were and will remain in the history of Israel an illustrious and great commander". She later reported that this was one of the most difficult moments of her life.<sup>28</sup> That night, Dayan hastily appointed General Gur as the next IDF chief of staff. Dado could no longer come back. Dayan again suggested to Golda that he, too, should resign, but she rejected the idea. She had no patience and nerves left for another cabinet crisis. In retrospect, she may have regretted that she did not let Dayan go. But she feared that if she did, Peres and the other Rafi members would also quit, the government would lose its Knesset majority and the country would be thrown once again into a vicious election campaign at the worst possible time.

The publication of the initial findings of the Agranat Commission stunned the nation. The public failed to understand why Dayan got off scotch free and Dado was forced to resign. The call for the resignation of the defense minister was renewed in much louder voices. Bereaved parents demanded this on behalf of their fallen sons. Golda had lost control. Everything around her was coming apart. It seemed that her party was fully focused only on the issue of Dayan's future. Some of the discussions held in the party verged on hysterics. As much as the public demanded that Dayan enter the Defense Ministry on the eve of the Six Days War, it now demanded his immediate departure after the Yom Kippur War. Then Golda tried to prevent his appointment, now she insisted that he stayed. But she hinted to him that his future in the cabinet would be determined by the party and not by the street. He also knew that he would resign only if Golda did,

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<sup>28</sup> Rabin, *Service Book*, pp. 413–414; Bartov, *Dado*, pp. 355–356; Ben-Porat, *Conversations*, p. 123.

too. A week after the publication of the report, she was still torn apart. Her conscience told her she must resign, her sense of duty told her to stay. Finally her conscience won. On April 10, 1974, she faced what amounted to an open rebellion among the members of the Labor Party Bureau and Knesset Faction. They demanded that Dayan resign, and if he did not, the entire cabinet should resign, which would lead inevitably to new elections. The formal proposal on the table was that there was a collective ministerial responsibility and the faction called on the prime minister to re-organize her cabinet. It was obvious to her that she had lost the confidence of her comrades and there was a possibility that some of the Labor Knesset members would either vote against the government or abstain in future votes. Golda rose to answer her critics. She was tired, drawn and pale, but spoke in a strong voice, in basic Hebrew, at times even in a bantering manner. She did not spare her comrades from her well-known sarcasm. This was in fact a summing up of fifty years of public service. Her entire speech is worth reading in exactly the way it was taken down, unedited:

I ask the comrades to at least believe what I am about to say, with no connection to the issue of Moshe Dayan. Even if Moshe Dayan yesterday, this morning and now rose and said that he was resigning, or that he was ready to move to another position, that would not make an iota of difference to what I am going to say now. I have not been to any circle, consulted with a small group, not the most intelligent, but to the extent there is some wisdom in this circle, and that is not new. I am guilty of nothing apart for one thing: that twice or thrice in the past year, in opposition to my inner conviction, I did something against my will and contrary to what I was convinced I should do. This was before what is called the earthquake and before the mishap. Even before the war, when we went to the elections at the end of October, I asked who should head the list. Many comrades know that I thought, I have had enough, also because of age, and in general enough. I surrendered.

I know that there are comrades here, and I heed their advice, who thought that at age 75 the desire to be prime minister is so strong, as Shulamit Allony says, that it stuck to some comrades among us, that abiding by the party writ is something ugly. This is how I was taught from an early age. I joined the movement in opposition to the Poalei Zion of America party constitution, below the age that comrades were admitted to the movement. Usually I do not regret my life, mistakes and stupidities—sure there were many. I did not betray my conscience. I deeply regret that I yielded then, I yielded after Yom Kippur and I yielded again a month ago. Contrary to some professors whom I heard yesterday who think that we put party unity above the good of the country, and this is despicable—I thought and still think now that the party and its unity, the unity of the workers' party, the strength of the labor movement, not only does it not stand in the face of what is good for the country, but that all this exists for the country...I came to realize that heading the list did not help the party unity. I think there is no argument over that. For many years, the more we spoke of the unity of the workers movement, the more this movement split apart, and if we speak about cancelling the sections of the party, they reorganize again...I wanted with all my heart that we shall become a united party... we did not succeed.

I think that the government that went out before the elections could with clear conscience and full heart write an illustrious chapter in politics, economy, and society—although when we speak of security, of the army, in spite of the mood in the country, experts do say—not me—in Israel and abroad that this was the greatest IDF victory. I already said that with all my love and admiration for every pilot, tank man and infantry soldier, with empty hands they could not do it, and that the army was equipped the way it never was in all the years—not, God forbid, because those who preceded us were less able and less loyal, but a certain constellation was created that this government knew how to exploit in full, and the IDF was equipped. The airlift did not come because those in the opposition and many of those who demonstrate had beautiful eyes. This must also be registered to the credit of the last government. I think and I am convinced that the makeup of this cabinet is good, with new men. We must not be ashamed of those who were before, apart from the prime minister...but dear comrades, we cannot ignore—I am perhaps less than many who sit here sensitive to what the public is saying, because none of us knows what the public says. We hear screams, we hear words of comrades who sit here. But the comrades who sit here, on every good and less good opportunity, who remind the people that this government must resign and go and it failed, and the top is such and such. If they told the truth to themselves and to the public, they would be saying that they have a political stand the opposite of what was adopted by all the authorized party institutions. It is their right, but they should not say this. But it's no less true that this government, I think unjustly, there is a certain mood being created around it, that I think it will not be able to stand, apart from one way. True, we had elections three months ago by law, the public elected whoever it elected, we lost several mandates. It's not the first time we lost mandates. But now, from within—young and not so young—whoever casts a stone at this government is young...but there are among us not so young, and when they say this, I do not know what they do with their identity card. The public has an image they are 25 years younger. But it's a fact—I do not believe that they let this government do what it has to do, not in the coming years and not next year, this year and in the coming weeks, they will not let it do what it has to do.

As for comrades who think there is one problem, how to get rid of this government and of the prime minister—they do not say of this policy. I hope that each government that will rise will not be misled by a policy that could really cause calamity to the country. We have disagreements over policy, but there are decisions. There will be a new convention that will decide differently. I can see in this a calamity, but that is my view. There were discussions, meetings of the Secretariat and the Central Committee, but there are comrades who think this does not bind them.

With no connection to the parliamentary responsibility that applies to Moshe Dayan, and even if he had resigned yesterday, I have reached the conclusion, I would rise today and say exactly what I am about to say now. Regrettably, what I am about to do binds the entire government, but that's not my fault, it's the law. If I were one minister, just a minister in the government, I would have done so gladly, I am doing it sadly. Not because it concerns me, but sadly because that entails the resignation of the entire government.

After being a lot with myself, I reached the conclusion that I can no longer bear this burden. Maybe it's not modesty, but I am sure there are comrades here, not all of them want me to go. I am sure that here and there, and I received today a letter that someone ran a private poll, and it was very nice. But that is not the issue. I feel I can no longer bear this burden.

I do not know if I can do it today, because there are other partners in the Alignment, there are also coalition partners, and what I do binds them as well.

However, I cannot do otherwise than go to the president. I congratulate those comrades who have finally achieved this victory. I wish them well this joy. I have nothing against them. I am not doing this because of them, I am doing this because to the best of my conscience and my consideration of that which I am able or unable to do.

I have been prime minister for five years, not the easiest five years. Many things happened, wars and political struggles, I did no more than any other minister. And it was not simple, not easy, lots of nerves, lots of energy, above my strength, and I have reached the end of the road. I ask friends not to try to persuade me, this time it will not work. It simply will not work. That is my conclusion...and as for the Alignment, how do we say, we shall face our fate and this is not dependent on the opposition. It depends on those within, on the Alignment, above all on the party, it depends on the group that sits here, us together. How did Hartsfeld say: Solo, solo, together together, so we are all solo but it no longer works like this, it no longer works in song, not in policy. This is a party whose membership, of a minister or a party member is voluntary. Debate, all the more so, but decision binds, and if it does not there is anarchy.

I hope the party will find its way, arguments, freedom of opinion, all is allowed but one thing: to remain in the party, to remain in the faction and act as though no decision was adopted. Today it's called 'conscience'. If someone's conscience does not agree with the way—go. Because there is no other way. No one compels anyone to be a member in the faction. If conscience, according to the 19<sup>th</sup> century concept, and I belong to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, means that I am in agreement with what the party decides then I accept this mission on its behalf. If I do not agree with what the party decides, I do not accept this mission. You can't remain in the party when you have a different opinion. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century it was different. I know I am 'mentally backward' and there is a new mode and new style, maybe it's like this. If the party decides that all is permitted, from within and from the outside, may it be blessed.

I have told this already. I believe that in Yaacov Einy's safe there is a closed letter where it is written: to open after my death. What is important, and I can tell you now is, I write, not one word of eulogy, nothing to be named after me...I do not want eulogies during my lifetime, mainly because people say one thing before and another after. I ask not to be eulogized now and not to try and persuade me to remain, it won't help. This time it's over...This is a decision from which I intend not to retreat.<sup>29</sup>

All this was said quietly, sadly and from the heart. She repeated the political ideology she adhered to all her life—party membership binds and the party writ is holy. She, at least, did not betray her conscience. Those present heard her quietly, no one interjected, and they let her say what was in her heart. When she rose, it appeared as though she was relieved at having unburdened herself of her intention: she finally told them how she felt. No one rose to plead with her not to go and no one seemed to object that she sensed that the time had come for her to

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<sup>29</sup> To the Labor Party Knesset Faction, 10 April 1974.

leave the center stage. When she left the Knesset, she was accompanied by one bodyguard. This was not a happy ending after 52 years of public service in Israel. This time, the comrades realized that she meant every word and her wishes had to be respected. Broken in body and in spirit, she had no other choice. The next day, she presented her resignation to President Katsir. According to law, she would now be a care-taker prime minister until a new cabinet would win a vote of confidence. This meant that she would head the Israeli negotiating team in the talks for disengagement of forces with Syria. She now focused all her energies on this. No one eulogized her. The editorials in the Hebrew media noted that the time had not yet come to take full account of her achievements and failures. All noted sadly that it was a pity it ended in such a manner. It was clear that the next cabinet will not include the leading figures with whom she had led Israel for so many years.

The party now turned to select its candidate for the office of prime minister. For the first time in the history of the labor movement, there developed an open struggle between the two leading candidates: Yitzhak Rabin and Shimon Peres. The days when the decision was made by a small group of leaders behind closed doors were over. The party leaders had no choice but to declare who was their favorite candidate. After Peres and Rabin announced their candidacy, a new name appeared, that of Abba Eban. Once Sapir announced that not only he was not a candidate, but he would not join the next cabinet, and his words were taken seriously, Eban naïvely thought that since Peres belonged to Rafi and Rabin was considered the candidate of Achdut Ha'avodah, he could claim Mapai credentials. The party Central Committee decided that the next cabinet would be based on the existing coalition, there was no need for elections. However, the positions of prime minister, defense minister and finance minister would have to be filled. Eban hoped he would have the support of the veteran Mapai leaders in the coming primaries.

The primaries were due to be held on April 22, 1974, the ones to decide would be the entire membership of the Central Committee. Until then, the two leading candidates began to seek votes among the members of that body. They also knew they would need the tacit support of the party elders, chiefly Golda and Sapir. These two had a problem: Peres was seen as the incarnation of Rafi and Golda could never forgive him for the split in the party. But Rabin lacked political and party experience. For the first time in the history of Israel, Mapai was unable to field a candidate from its own ranks. Had Golda pressed Sapir very hard to succeed her, he may have changed his mind. But she refrained from doing so because she had in the past had many arguments with him on foreign and defense policies in addition to the future of the territories under Israel's control. Golda and Sapir came to the conclusion that they must support the lesser evil—Yitzhak Rabin. Golda never liked the idea of primaries. It was too American. Leaders should not

be elected by party rank and file; they ought to be elevated due to service and seniority. That was how she reached the top. This was known in Mapai as accepting the party's command.

She liked Rabin, whom she knew from the day he was born. His mother and Golda shared a desk at Solel Boneh in Jerusalem in the early 1920's. She saw Rabin as a man of principles and values, even though he lacked party background. His rich military and diplomatic experience would come in handy and he would be a quick student and soon learn to navigate the party maze. She also knew that he had many friends in Washington. After all, he had been her ambassador in that capital for five years. On the negative side, she was not sure to what extent he was committed to the values of the labor movement, he often did not show respect for politicians and had some nasty things to say about many of them. Like most Israelis, she assumed that since he was educated in schools that belonged to the labor movement and was one of the founders and senior officers of the Palmach, he was bound to lead Israel along her vision. She may have harbored some doubts whether he could function well in situations of severe stress; she remembered his very brief breakdown on the eve of the Six Days War.

But when she compared him with his rival, she had no doubt whom she was going to support. Her views of Peres were known well since the early 1950's and nothing had happened since that would result in a change of her views. She did not forget the struggles between the Defense and the Foreign Ministries in the 1950's and 1960's, Peres's vast influence on Ben-Gurion, the split in Mapai, what she considered his blackmail on the eve of the Six Days War, his dependency on Dayan, and above all the creation of Rafi. She would do nothing to help his campaign, but she would not go out of her way to harm him, either. She never took Eban's candidacy seriously. She never thought that Eban had enough strength of character to lead the nation.

On the day the Central Committee voted, she chose to be absent. A day before, she belatedly announced her support for Rabin. He won by a slim majority and received 298 votes while Peres received 254, the margin was not impressive and Peres could claim that he was quite successful against many odds, one of them being Golda's opposition. Rabin had no choice but to appoint Peres as defense minister in his cabinet. Allon became foreign minister in addition to deputy prime minister. Eban was offered the information portfolio but he turned it down angrily and chose to stay out of the cabinet. His warning that world Jewry would never understand why the Voice of Israel was not in the cabinet did not impress Rabin. The man who failed to win the mayoralty of Tel Aviv, Yehoshua Rabinovich, became finance minister. Sapir selected to become chairman of the Executive of the Jewish Agency and the World Zionist Organization. The Israeli negotiating team that still included Dayan, Golda, Allon and Eban, were now joined by the

new Chief of Staff Mordechai Gur, Rabin and Peres. The general assumption was that the negotiations would be speedy and run according to the Egyptian model. But these expectations proved to be wrong.

The opponent was Assad now and not Sadat and Kissinger apparently failed to find ways to win his friendship. The Golan Heights was much closer to Damascus, and it held vast strategic and economic value for Israel. It was much nearer to the heartland of Israel than the Suez Canal. By 1974, there were already 20 Israeli settlements with some 2,000 settlers there, while much of Sinai was not heavily populated by Israelis. The Golan was very close to the vital water sources of Israel. Unlike the Egyptians, the Syrians were considered Soviet protégés and far more vicious enemies that murdered Israeli prisoners of war. The relative small size of the Golan limited Israel's ability to make territorial concessions. In late April 1974, Israel began to recover somewhat from the Yom Kippur War and could be far more insistent. The Syrians, they knew, had little to offer, unlike the Egyptians who controlled the Suez Canal. The Protest Movement in Israel abated now that Golda and Dayan were out. On the other side of the Atlantic, Nixon's standing was steadily eroding and he desperately needed another foreign policy achievement to bolster his sinking administration. He also wanted to make sure that he escapes impeachment and expelled from the White House. He ordered Kissinger to remain in the region as long as it took to obtain an agreement. It took almost a month.

The initial Syrian demand was that the IDF would first withdraw to the lines of October 6, 1973, which meant giving up the Salient occupied by Israel in the final days of the war. They agreed to the establishment of a disengagement of forces zone under United Nations control and that there would be two thin strips of land on both sides of the buffer zones where the parties would be allowed a limited number of personnel and weapons. However, Assad insisted on a deeper Israeli withdrawal and the return of the entire city of Kuneitra to Syrian control. Israel was not willing to give up the ridge above Kuneitra because of its strategic importance since it had built electronic warning devices there that could sense and hear and feel all the way to Damascus. Between May 2 and the 29<sup>th</sup>, Kissinger shuttled almost daily from Jerusalem to Damascus. He preferred to spend the days in meetings with Assad and return to Jerusalem in the late evening and spend the night at the "King David" hotel.<sup>30</sup> The nights were also devoted to talks with the Israeli team. This often led to frayed nerves and raised voices. As usual, Kissinger started by explaining to the Israelis how dire Israel's international

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**30** For the Syrian Disengagement talks see FRUS, Vol. XXVI, Washington, 2012, pp. 105–381; Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, pp. 1049–1110; Eban, *Autobiography*, pp. 573–577; Dayan, *Milestones*, pp. 713–717; Golan, *The Secret Conversations of Henry Kissinger*, Tel Aviv, 1976.



position was and how very few options it had. He argued that Israel did not face the choice now between good and bad alternatives, but between the bad and the worse. As usual, he warned of dire consequences to Israeli-American relations if the talks failed. The other choice Israel had was to make territorial concessions on the Golan which meant heavy security risks.

Kissinger wanted an Israeli withdrawal beyond the purple line, to the old cease-fire lines of June 1967, mainly in the Kuneitra area. That would give Assad prestige in Syria and the rest of the Arab world. Assad for his part said that he could not accept less than what Israel gave Sadat. When it came to the ridges, to which Kissinger referred to as the “six lousy miles”, Israel was adamant. He blamed the Israelis of being stubborn mainly to protect the settlements on the Golan that he in any case thought were illegal. Golda, who listened to Kissinger patiently, could not contain herself and said:

If you strangle me, I don't know how to go to the people and explain to them that, after all, never mind there was a war, there was another war, more dead, more wounded, but we have to give up Syrian territory. Why? because Assad says so... I can never accept that there is no difference between the attacker and the attacked. I can't accept that... I can't make peace with the idea that we had two wars in seven years, with the price we paid for it. Then Assad says he must get his territory back. I mean, that is chutzpah of the nth degree. How is it possible... Isn't it an encouragement for our neighbors to go on fighting when the fighting does not lose anything?<sup>31</sup>

Kissinger almost lost his patience and shouted that he felt like a rug merchant in an oriental bazaar arguing over 100 or 200 meters of land. That was not respectable for the United States secretary of state. He said that while he was trying to save Israel, the Israelis thought they were doing him a favor by offering several more meters as though he was a resident of Kuneitra and intended to build his home there.<sup>32</sup>

The talks were suspended for one day, on May 15, 1974. Early that morning, Palestinian terrorists penetrated into the town of Ma'alot in northern Israel, killed a family and took over a school where some 80 Israeli teenagers who were on a school trip with their teachers were sleeping. The cabinet held an emergency meeting. In a makeshift command post near the besieged school, Dayan and Gur discussed their options. Gur tended to accept the terrorists' demands that included release of terrorists imprisoned in Israel and flying them to Damascus under the supervision of the French and Romanian ambassadors to Israel. Gur feared that in case of a break into the school, the victims would be children.

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<sup>31</sup> Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, p. 1054.

<sup>32</sup> Golan, *Secret Conversations*, p. 170.

Dayan insisted that there must be no deviation from the Israeli policy of no negotiations when hostages were being held. Both flew to Jerusalem and asked for a cabinet decision, meaning that Golda would have to take the ultimate decision that would impact on the life or death of some 80 children. The cabinet initially approved a swap but authorized Dayan to continue the negotiations and act according to his understanding of the situation. Golda was tense with fear. She knew that any decision she would make would set a precedent. Surrender would be shameful and encourage similar attacks. But breaking into the school could mean huge number of casualties. The final decision was to attack and an elite IDF unit broke into the school. Before being killed, the terrorists managed to hurl hand grenades that killed 16 children. That evening Kissinger went to see Golda and offer his condolences. She was inconsolable, placing full responsibility for what happened on herself: “This is the meaning of being a national leader. The fate of the Jews is to be victims, but the killing of children is too much.”<sup>33</sup>

The next day the children were buried, a commission of inquiry was constituted and the disengagement talks continued. On many occasions, they were on the verge of collapse. From Washington, Nixon watched their progress. When it appeared to him that the talks were doomed to fail, he lost his patience and ordered Kissinger’s deputy, General Brent Scowcroft, to threaten Israel with the suspension of American aid. This was the last thing Kissinger wanted. He knew that such a move would only bolster the leaders of Israel. The order was rescinded. Unlike the Sinai, Golda knew the Golan much better. She had much sympathy toward the settlers, most of whom came from the labor movement. At some point, when Assad asked for additional Israeli territorial concessions, Golda cynically remarked: “Why don’t you give them something? You have done it each time until today. If you make them used to it that in each visit you bring them another piece of land, they will never cease from asking for more”. But slowly, an agreement was being fashioned. One last hurdle was Israel’s demand that Syria would agree that the agreement would include an item banning activities of irregular forces, meaning the PLO. This was finally agreed, and on May 29, a small gathering was held in the cabinet room next to Golda’s office. Golda, deeply moved, congratulated Kissinger warmly. He kissed her cheek. She said: “I thought you only kissed men”, reference to his many arrivals and departures to and from Arab capitals where he would be greeted with the traditional hugs and kisses.

The next day, she addressed the Knesset for the last time, presented the agreement and asked for Knesset approval. It was a very subdued event. This was also the final appearance of Dayan as defense minister, of Eban as foreign

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<sup>33</sup> Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, p. 1079.

minister and of Sapir as finance minister. They would, however, remain in the Knesset. Golda would not. She described at length the nature of the agreement and stressed that the United States agreed that Israel would have the right of self-defense against terror attacks from across the new disengagement lines. There was little doubt that under the existing circumstances, this was the best agreement that could have been attained. Even the Likud speakers were not that convincing when they attacked the agreement. All thought that a line had to be drawn to end the war and for this a heavy price would be required. The hope was that this agreement would widen the wedge between Egypt and Syria, which occurred, and perhaps even open the door for a more extended American presence in Syria that could reduce Syria's dependence on the Soviet Union, which did not happen. The expectations that something would begin to move in Damascus as it did in Cairo proved to be premature. The Syrians insisted that the agreement be signed in Geneva by officers and said it was a purely military arrangement. In her Knesset address, Golda repeated the familiar motive of the need to bring the prisoners home and the ever-present need to retain America's friendship and to end the war of attrition on the Golan Heights.<sup>34</sup> Golda met the returning prisoners at the airport. She swore to herself that the last thing she would do before leaving office would be to bring back the prisoners. Now most of them came alive. The dead were returned in wooden coffins.

Meanwhile, Rabin succeeded in putting together his cabinet and presented it to the Knesset on June 2. He declared that his government would follow the policy of the Meir government in foreign policy as well as internal affairs. He paid Golda enormous compliments and expanded on the leader whose figure would forever be etched in the history of the nation as a courageous mother, leader of the nation who stood like a rock in the face of the most difficult political and military battles. Her special personality, her character and her love for the Jewish people made her one of the greatest leaders that Israel had ever produced.<sup>35</sup>

Having won the confidence of the Knesset, Rabin and his ministers signed their oaths of allegiance, and then, as if under an order, Golda Meir, Moshe Dayan, Abba Eban and Pinchas Sapir rose from the cabinet table in the Knesset and made their way to the back benches of the Labor Party. For the first time in the history of Israel, the four most senior ministers had left office. There were no other farewell addresses. Formally, Golda still retained her Knesset membership. She had not yet summed up her career. There were many farewell events held in

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<sup>34</sup> Statement in the Knesset, 30 May 1974; for the text of the agreement see Medzini, Documents, pp. 1129–1136.

<sup>35</sup> Rabin's Statement in the Knesset, 3 June 1974.

her honor by the president of Israel, the cabinet, the Knesset, the Foreign Affairs and Security Committee, the IDF Supreme Command, the Editors' Committee. There was even a modest farewell gathering in her office by the small group of her aides. Few ever thought this would be the way it ended. On June 4, Rabin came to the Prime Minister's Office where she formally handed over the job. In his speech, he recalled how Golda had raised his spirits on the eve of the Six Days War, but did not elaborate. Her entire senior staff remained at their posts. Rabin preferred at this time to keep the old staff. She wished Rabin that he lead the state towards peace and expressed her happiness that finally the torch was passed to native-born Israelis who had fought in all of Israel's wars and now would engage in the battle for peace.

Since Rabin decided that he wanted to make his official residence in the old foreign minister's residence on Balfour Street, there was no immediate pressure on her to vacate the residence on Ben Maimon Street, but she started moving some of her belongings to Ramat Aviv. It appeared as though her mood somewhat improved, but there were moments of anxiety and she seemed restless and impatient. Two weeks later, she attended the events in honor of an important guest—Richard Nixon. The president and his advisers may have thought that in order to try and rescue his presidency that by now was sinking to the bottom, and in order to utilize the recent achievements of the United States in the peace-making process, it would be a good idea that he visit some of the capitals in the region. That would temporarily put Watergate in the background and would enable Nixon to hang on to the White House for a few more weeks. The press covering his trip would report that at least in the Middle East he was very popular.

His visit to Israel (June 16–18, 1974) was the first ever of an American president. It was a strange mixture of ceremonies, speeches and some serious discussions on the next steps. While it was evident to the Israeli hosts that Nixon's days in the White House were numbered, Kissinger would remain. Before arriving in Israel, Nixon made a number of promises to Assad and to Sadat that would have caused Israel an apoplexy, had they been made in normal times and become known to Israel. He promised Assad that he would bring Israel down from the entire Golan Heights. He promised Sadat that he would return Israel to the old international border and resolve the Palestinian issue. He promised King Hussein disengagement of forces in the West Bank. Israel knew nothing of these promises apart from one: the offer Nixon made to Sadat to help Egypt build a nuclear reactor. This news could have seriously embarrassed Rabin's new government. Rabin wanted dignified ceremonies and not vocal public arguments over this, certainly not when his government was barely two weeks old.

After arriving in Israel and being received at the airport by President Katsir and Prime Minister Rabin, Nixon went to Golda's residence. She greeted him at

the door with a very warm hug. The president was made up for television and some of the makeup spilled on Golda's face. Nixon was limping due to phlebitis that he had recently developed. In her living room, there was a lively discussion in the presence of Rabin and many of their aides. She thanked the president for all he had done for Israel. He spoke of his commitment to the people of Israel. When they talked about terror, the president surprised his hosts by saying that the only way to fight terror was to do as he would do, he got up and acted out a man firing a submachine gun. That evening, President Katsir held a state dinner at the Knesset. Nixon started his address in contravention of the diplomatic protocol. He praised Golda profusely:

Tonight I would like to propose a second toast and propose it first, not in derogation of your president, but because I discussed the matter with him and have his permission. I have had the great privilege over the past 27 years to travel to over 80 countries. I have met most of the leaders of the world. Some were called great, some near great and some were called things much worse than that. I also had a chance as president to meet, talk to and evaluate most of the leaders on the current scene today and those who have been on it over the past five years.

And I can say to this audience gathered here in the Knesset in Israel that no other leader I have met, no president, no king, no prime minister, or any other leader has demonstrated in this meeting that I have had with that leader greater courage, greater intelligence, greater stamina, greater determination, and greater dedication to her country than Prime Minister Meir.

He then proposed a toast to the former prime minister. Golda rose to thank him and said: "As President Nixon says, presidents can do almost anything, and President Nixon has done things that nobody would have thought of doing. All I can say, Mr. President, as a friend and as an Israeli citizen to a great American President: Thank you".<sup>36</sup>

The party was over. When Nixon was about to leave, she said to him: "Look after yourself and get plenty of rest". Maybe those were her plans for the coming years of her retirement. But both leaders could not even begin to rest, each one for different reason. Nixon had insomnia because of Watergate, but no one died in that affair. Golda had sleepless nights because of the Yom Kippur War and its 2,600 dead. To a journalist, she said: "I will never be the same Golda from before the Yom Kippur War. Yes, I smile, I laugh, I listen to music, I tell stories, I hear stories, but deep in my heart...inside...it is not the same Golda and never will be".<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Nixon toast and Golda reply, Medzini, Documents, Vol. III, pp. 28–29.

<sup>37</sup> Interview with Dov Goldstein, Ma'ariv, 10 December 1978.

## 20 Everything Is Sinking (1974–1978)

“The long road has come to its end”, this was how Golda described her feelings after retiring from public life. Her feeling of relief was evident and she was honest about it. After more than half a century of public life in Israel and several years before that in America, after five years of bearing the supreme responsibility as prime minister, she now faced a period of adjustment that was not as easy as she initially thought it would be. The physical move from her office in the Kiryah in Jerusalem and the residence in Rehavia to her modest home on Baron Hirsch Street in Ramat Aviv was long and lasted several months. From April 10 until the end of July she was busy with the Syrian disengagement talks, and then came the Nixon visit. It was followed by the farewell parties. It suddenly dawned on her that she had made no plans for her retirement. This fit her way of life. She never made let alone thought carefully about long-range planning. While still in office, she spoke longingly of the day she would no longer have to go to the office, answer phone calls, live according to a tight schedule, being always accompanied by bodyguards, rarely having time to read a book or attend a concert. But she did not have to worry for long because she was soon kept very busy with a number of projects.

The first was to complete her memoirs and to see the publication of the book. With the help of Rina Samuel, she now added the events of the past two years. The book was published in 1975 and became an instant bestseller. The reviews were ecstatic. The “Los Angeles Times” reviewer wrote that the book was deeply moving and candid. “Mrs. Meir’s story is both private and public”. The “Chicago Tribune” found it inspiring, passionate and compelling and said that the book read like an adventure novel. “Newsweek” praised the book and said that it “glows with a passion usually reserved for love stories. Golda Meir”, said “Newsweek”, “devoted her adult life to the birth and rearing of Israel... she had a great story to tell, and because she tells it vividly and candidly her book offers both the intimacy of a private memoir and the sweep of history.” The book reviewer of the “New York Times” said that the book was not only a political tale but also a human and very dramatic one. The “San Francisco Examiner” called it “a terrific tale of commitment, courage, honesty, loneliness, trauma, strength and labor... fascinating and extremely well-written”. The best compliment was given to the book by Billy Graham. He thought that this was the greatest book he ever read. The book was translated soon after to Hebrew, French, German, Spanish and even Japanese and won the plaudits of reviewers in many countries. Most of the readers were removed from the Israeli reality and could not judge whether Golda was indeed candid and told the entire story. She made a strenuous effort not to

reveal hitherto unknown secrets or to criticize people and events, mostly those she disliked.

A more balanced assessment was provided in 1976 by the writer Saul Bellow. In his book “To Jerusalem and Back”, he wrote that the book was disappointing. It seemed to him that Mrs. Meir, a woman of a very strong character, censored her strongest emotions and in her book she adopted what he called the gentlemanly style of the American Congress—“the Honorable Gentleman from the Great State of Arkansas etc”. Her motive, he felt, was certainly political. Since she was still identified with the Government of Israel, Golda Meir did not want to harm or turn some American supporters to enemies. Her polite writing about President Nixon and others is candid, but she spared her readers and did not give them what she could. He added that there was a need to dig under the comments to learn what her real sentiments were.<sup>1</sup> Bellow was not alone in his criticism. He was later joined by some Israeli reviewers who were not very satisfied, mostly over the absence of many details they felt she concealed and her distorted view of reality. But the tone she used, heart to heart, the intimacy that she created and the feeling that Golda told her intimate life story to every reader almost in a personal way, overcame some of the criticism. She expected this and in the introduction she wrote: “I have never written diaries and I would never write letters and I never expected that I would write my life story”. She did not thank any of those who helped her, barely mentioned some of her close aides and advisers. But the book is free of malice and account settling, exactly the opposite of some Israeli leaders who wrote their memoirs after they retired. She never claimed that she did everything alone and she took responsibility for the many tragedies in her life—her failed marriage, raising her children from afar, the Yom Kippur War. She was fair to her opponents. Clearly the book was never meant to be a political history of Israel, of the Zionist movement, of the Labor movement or of Israel’s foreign policy. She wrote what she remembered and what she wanted others to remember. Obviously, many events were not mentioned, bitter memories were conspicuously absent.

The book was well received in Israel, although with somewhat less enthusiasm than abroad. There was a feeling that it was not intended for Israelis but for foreigners. The book made a lot of money, which she welcomed. She had no financial problems. The government of Israel treats former prime ministers very generously. They get a good pension, an office, a secretary, an official car and driver, bodyguards, newspapers, and the state even pays their postal and phone bills. Their health costs are also taken care of. Shortly after leaving office, Golda

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<sup>1</sup> Saul Bellow, *To Jerusalem and Back*, New York, 1976, p. 114.

thought she would have no need for an office and a secretary, at least this was what she told Lou Kadar whom she regularly saw when she was in Jerusalem and in whose modest apartment she stayed overnight. She preferred that to fancy hotels, unless she had to meet overseas visitors, then she preferred the “King David” Hotel. Every appearance at the lobby of the hotel earned her much applause from tourists, Jews and non-Jews alike. The phone in her apartment never ceased ringing although the number was unlisted. People wanted to see her, invitations to undertake speaking engagements poured in. She was offered huge sums of money. Unlike some of her successors, who soon after leaving office engaged a speaker’s bureau and charged tens of thousand of dollars for their speeches, she never dreamed of asking for honorariums. There were also requests for newspaper, radio and television interviews. Every official visitor to Israel felt that his prestige would suffer unless he was given an audience with the “old lady”. She became a national monument. “The Grandmother of the State” had a renewed lease of life. She was the last of the founding parents. The new Israeli leadership could not aspire to overshadow her even if they tried hard, which none of them did. As time went on, there was some tendency to forget and even to forgive the past. People began to search for the good things she had done. The public sought heroes and she supplied this image as the one who was the link with the heroic and august formative years of Israel.

Her second project, in which she failed, was to try and prove to her critics how much she worked for peace while she was prime minister and how many were her attempts to bring closer the positions of Israel and Egypt. She asked her last bureau chief, Ely Mizrachi, to collect from all sources available all the relevant documents and prepare them for possible future publication. The more the criticism grew over her role in the Yom Kippur War, the more she was determined to publish the truth as she saw it. Mizrachi began to collect the material, but his work was far from completed during the remaining years of her life. In Israel, the name Golda Meir will always be linked with the Yom Kippur War as Ben-Gurion would always be linked with the War of Independence.

Retirement was not easy on her. Shortly after leaving office, she underwent a cataract operation in both eyes, for several weeks she could not see well. Then she donned heavy black sunglasses. It took her several months to fully recover. Even when she regained her eyesight, she was not prone to reading or idle chats. Being by nature active and restless, she equated reading and writing with inaction and thought that writing one book was enough for her. The routine was often interrupted by overseas travel. In March 1975, she traveled to London at the invitation of the Joint Israel Appeal. This central body of British Jewry rented the Royal Albert Hall with its 7,500 seats and invited its major donors and volunteers to meet the former prime minister. The hall was brimming with thousands



of people long before she arrived. At the given hour, everyone was hushed. One ray of light was lit and focused on her bent figure, dressed in a simple black dress, Golda slowly ascended the stage. The entire crowd rose to their feet clapping excitedly. Some cried. Many knew that this would be the last time they would see this amazing woman alive. She began her speech quietly, then her voice steadied and rose, slowly the crowd was riveted by what she had to say. She spoke of the desires of an old Jewish woman for peace and security, for a better future for Israeli society based on equality and quality in its ancient homeland. There was nothing they had not heard before, but the manner in which she spoke made everyone feel as though she was addressing him or her personally. Such events gave her a new lease on life.

There were many trips to the United States as the guest of the United Jewish Appeal, Israel Bonds and other Jewish organizations. The organizers knew that Golda would draw the crowd as she was the motherly-authoritative person that everyone wanted to hear and see. She now became an elder stateswoman wherever she went. There was another trip to Brussels for a conference on Soviet Jewry. Everywhere she attracted enormous attention. She traveled accompanied by two bodyguards and was received at the airport by the Israeli ambassador and representatives of the local government as though she was still prime minister. For a moment, she felt that she was and that once again she was representing the state of Israel. While there were many days and evenings of much satisfaction, there were also sleepless nights. She tired more easily and needed longer periods of rest. Now the hosts spared her and did not pack her schedule.

She soon received a suite of rooms in a large office building in the heart of Tel Aviv. The Labor Party put a secretary at her disposal that dealt with coordinating her schedule, answering thousands of letters, arranging interviews and meetings with visiting VIPs. She was now more selective and careful who she would meet. One day she was interviewed by Julie Eisenhower-Nixon, a journalist and writer. She found Golda on a bad day. Golda was tired and spoke slowly and heavily. She refused to openly discuss her marriage and the involvement of her family in her career. She opted not to discuss current political events in Israel and in America. She admitted that it was not easy for her to become an elder stateswoman after decades of activity. In her book "Special People", Julie Nixon noted that when Golda did not like a question, she became hard like a rock, did not move her heavy body. Her eyes were cold and dark. If she chose to respond, she spoke briefly. At the end of the interview, Golda asked Julie how her father was and spoke of him with much appreciation and tenderness. The daughter of the deposed president could not contain herself and burst in tears.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Nixon, *Special People*, pp. 1–38.

In early 1975, Golda had ample reasons to be despondent. The hopes and expectations attached to the new leadership of Israel, native-born, tempered by the wars, that they would lead the country from the abyss of the Yom Kippur War to a better future, turned out to be premature. She had no great expectations of Shimon Peres, but pinned her hopes on Yitzhak Rabin, although she knew that he had very limited political experience before he was catapulted to the office of prime minister. He grew up in the military hierarchy, having served in the IDF for 27 years. He did not have much respect or appreciation for party politicians or much patience for the party institutions and long discussions. He held few politicians in awe. Like Golda and Ben-Gurion, and unlike Eshkol, he preferred to deal primarily with two issues he knew well—defense and foreign policy. Soon he ignored the party institutions and removed most of the party leaders from the decision-making process when it came to major developments. The party organs barely functioned. Golda became increasingly alarmed over the decline of the party establishment. She was not overly awed by the new lifestyle of Rabin and mainly of his wife that focused on social gatherings, receptions and frequent mentioning in the gossip columns. She was not that happy that the Rabins chose to purchase a penthouse apartment in Ramat Aviv, not too far from her far more modest home.

She was very careful not to give public vent to her feelings on national and party events. She kept her remarks to a small and closed circle of family and long-time friends who gathered at her home for coffee and cakes. In his first year as prime minister, Rabin used to consult with her on a regular basis, to seek her advice and learn from her vast and rich experience. But as time passed and he felt more assured of himself and of his standing, the visits became sparse and then ceased altogether. She remained a member of the party's central bodies, but did not attend their meetings on a regular basis. She obtained her information of what was happening in the party from friends and family relatives and from the media. She did not travel much around Israel. In 1976, she acceded to the pleas of the veteran workers of the Ministry of Labor and agreed to set up a fund to provide scholarships for disadvantaged youth in development towns and other peripheral zones in the country. For a moment, she seemed to have forgotten her request that nothing be named after her. She also contributed to this fund. Until 1978, she even attended the ceremonies when scholarships were awarded and used the opportunity to visit the border areas, particularly in the north, near the Lebanese border. She willingly agreed to serve as the honorary president of the international young pianists contest named after the pianist Artur Schnabel whom she knew well.

In the final months of 1974 and early 1975, the Rabin government focused all its attention on renewed negotiations with Egypt that were aimed at reaching

an Interim Agreement. When Rabin entered office, he decided to stick to the policy of his predecessor. He would not make dramatic changes that inevitably would have meant withdrawal in the West Bank and in East Jerusalem. He chose to continue the Kissinger step-by-step approach that was designed to deepen the trust between Israel and Egypt, further remove the threat of war, and increase the wedge between Egypt and Syria. It would enable the Egyptians to clear the Canal and reopen it for navigation. This would create the right psychological environment for Egypt to advance towards a political settlement and abandon the military path as a means to resolving the Arab-Israel conflict. Rabin visited Washington in the summer of 1974 and met with President Gerald Ford who had succeeded Nixon after his resignation in August 1974 and wisely kept Kissinger as his secretary of state. Kissinger visited Israel on a number of occasions, Foreign Minister Allon went to Washington and slowly the basic outline of a new agreement was beginning to emerge.

Israel would agree to withdraw from certain parts in western Sinai, allow the creation of a larger separation of forces zone under United Nations supervision, would also withdraw from the oil fields in Sinai in return for an Interim Agreement with Egypt and, even more importantly, assure continued American military, political and economic aid. Rabin had hoped that this time Egypt would be ready to sign an agreement that would have political overtones and not be a strictly military one. He looked for an agreement lasting at least eight to ten years. That would give Israel the time to fully recover from what Rabin called the “Seven Lean Years”. All this would fit nicely with the American Middle East policy that aimed at further reducing what was left of Soviet influence in Egypt, move slowly towards a broader Israel-Egypt agreement and reduce tensions in that part of the world. All this, claimed Rabin and Kissinger, would enable the Ford administration to mark another political achievement that would surely help Ford when he ran for the presidency in 1976. When Kissinger visited Israel in the fall of 1974, he made sure that his talk with Golda at her home be extensively covered by the media.

In March 1975, the talks foundered. Egypt demanded an Israeli withdrawal from the Gidi and Mitla passes, the return of the oil fields in Abu Rudeis and the entry of Egyptian forces to the areas vacated by the IDF. But the Egyptians refused to sign an agreement that would end the state of war as demanded by Rabin. Once again, the Egyptians were ready to sign an agreement that would have purely military characteristics and no political overtones and implications that would be valid at most for two years. Israel refused and Rabin was prepared to risk a major crisis in the relations with the United States. This time, he was supported by the majority of Israelis. To rescue the talks and to add pressure on Israel, Kissinger arranged for Ford to write a letter to Rabin in which the president threatened

Israel that he would undertake a “reassessment” on the part of the United States, including “our relations with Israel”. Rabin and his cabinet rejected the insulting letter and made sure its contents would be leaked to the media. The publication of the letter caused a storm of protest in Israel that strengthened Rabin’s hand. Israel suspended the talks and Kissinger returned to Washington empty-handed. Before leaving the country, he paid a visit to Golda. To the journalists accompanying him, he later said that Golda offered him tea and sympathy, fully supported Rabin’s stand and told him that it was still two to one in his favor.<sup>3</sup> On the way to Washington, Kissinger placed full blame on Israel for the suspension of the talks.

Cooler heads soon prevailed. The indefatigable Dinitz was able to obtain a letter signed by 76 Senators who objected to Ford’s policy of punishing Israel. Both sides decided to climb down from the ladder. In the course of the summer of 1975, Rabin met with Kissinger in Germany and with Ford in Washington. Ford met with Sadat in Salzburg and new ideas were injected. One of them was to introduce civilian American inspectors who would operate the early-warning electronic installations in the area of the passes that would be evacuated by Israel. Israel would withdraw from the passes and the oil fields and would be replaced not by the Egyptian army but by civilians. There would be a large demilitarized buffer zone. Egypt and Israel would operate their own early-warning stations at the entry to the passes in addition to the one to be operated by the American civilians in Umm Hashiba. Israel would still keep some 92% of Sinai in her hands and the agreement would be in force until replaced by a peace treaty. Informally it was understood that the agreement would last three years, (which is exactly what happened).

In addition to and in order to sweeten the pill, Israel and the United States signed a far-reaching Memorandum of Understanding (drafted by Gazit) containing extensive American commitments to Israel. They included the supply of oil from American sources in case of an emergency, respect for the freedom of navigation in international waterways including the Suez Canal, the Straits of Tiran and the Straits of Bab El Mandeb and even the Straits of Gibraltar. One American official later joked that Israel left Chesapeake Bay out of the agreement. It would be the height of *chutzpah*, said an Israeli official. It was also agreed that the United States would not recognize the PLO until that organization accepted Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338 and abandon terror. The United States would oppose the establishment of an independent Palestinian state in the territories, would consult with Israel prior to taking any new initiative, especially in relation to the re-convening of the Geneva Peace Conference, and above all would supply

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<sup>3</sup> Richard Valeriani, *Travels with Henry*, Boston, 1979, p. 230.

Israel with the latest and most modern and sophisticated weapons, including the “Pershing” missile. This agreement was a major breakthrough in Israel-America relations and when it was signed by Allon and Kissinger in Jerusalem on September 1, 1975, everyone once again heaved a sigh of relief. Both sides made sure that its full contents would be leaked to the “New York Times”.

It now seemed logical that the next step would be a peace treaty with Egypt, but at this stage, there was no need to rush. The next day, the Labor Party Bureau met. Golda was greeted with applause, sat next to Rabin and chain-smoked. In her brief remarks, she said: “I congratulated the prime minister and the members of his team when the talks were halted in March. I congratulated him last night when the agreement was signed, in both cases I think justly”, although it was not a peace treaty yet. She mentioned that during a talk she had recently in the United States, “with a certain personality, not Kissinger,” she asked him: “Are you proposing that we believe that in the next three years there will be no war. He did not say no; in another half a year? He said: Perhaps. It is a good agreement, it is not peace, but every day that passes with no war is a great day for us. But we must never educate the people to believe that it’s over—there will be no more wars”. She added that Israel had won the wars without the Mitla and the Gidi. “I have been taught that the passes are not that simple, they are not just territory. I bow my head to all the former generals, every chief of staff in the past and future, even if they claim that the passes are important”. She referred to Dayan who was bitterly opposed to the agreement. She was still totally opposed to returning the Golan Heights as long as Assad did not agree to talk with Israel. Why should the Syrians be given advance payment, she asked? She would be prepared to consider the return of a narrow strip of land for total peace with Syria. She had one prayer, “that I should live one hour, five minutes, on the day when we shall know that the wars were over. You are all young and will reach that day. I will not. We must know that which is bitter, more bitter than death, is that in order to bring peace nearer we have to be ready for war”. Rabin thanked her for her support and said that he had known Golda for many years. “I have appreciated and admired her in action. I think that in the history of Mapai there had never been an example for the relations between prime ministers to those who followed them. Only Golda is endowed with charity and fairness and acted differently”.<sup>4</sup>

Now the time had come to deal with domestic issues without thinking constantly of Sadat and Assad or even of Kissinger. However, inasmuch as Israel’s international standing improved considerably, the domestic front appeared to

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<sup>4</sup> Labor Party Central Committee, 2 September 1975; see also Aryeh Avneri, *The Downfall*, Tel Aviv, 1978, pp. 250–252.

be on the verge of collapse. In the summer of 1975, there were more revelations of corruption at the highest levels of the government of Israel. Key figures were interrogated and sent to prison. One of them was the former director general of the Ministry of Commerce and Industry under Sapir and later served as chairman of the board of the National Steamship Company. Other revelations had to do with donations to the party to finance election campaigns. The public was aghast. “Have we sunk so deeply in the mire”, asked the editorials, “who else is involved”? Would there be an attempt to sweep all of this under the carpet? These revelations, coming shortly after Watergate, resulted in screaming headlines and many hours of radio and television coverage. Much of the anger was directed at the man who was called “the father of the system”, Pinchas Sapir. It was he who masterminded the Mapai election campaigns, he also built Israel’s industry, he appointed his men to key positions in the economy and gave them vast power and influence, and some even became wealthy. They repaid him by helping finance the election campaigns. Some even transferred large sums of money to the party’s offshore bank accounts. The Labor Party Bureau held two discussions on this issue (June 25 and July 10, 1975) to deal with what was elliptically called integrity and honesty in society and the economy. No one wanted to use the term corruption, although all knew that this was the proper word. Sapir was the target, and Golda was among the few who defended him. She still felt that the expression of comradeship and friendship held much significance. “All of Sapir’s critics did not do in their entire life what Sapir had done with the fingernail of one hand,” she said. But she did not have much to say to the heart of the matter. She had never been interested or involved with the financial resources that oiled the party’s election campaigns. Sapir suffered a heart attack several weeks later and died.<sup>5</sup>

The party was going downhill and Rabin thought that he needed to do something to lift it from the abyss to which it had sunk. He decided to set up a new party organ called “The Leadership Forum”, and asked Golda to head it. Others in the body would be Rabin, Peres, Galili and other less luminary politicians. This new structure was supposed to coordinate between the Histadrut and the government through the Labor Party. The forum met several times and died. The public response to this body was mixed. Some felt the time had come to clean the stables, some felt that because of his inexperience Rabin needed Golda’s authority. Several thought that Rabin did something unjust to drag Golda back to this

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 219–220. For the first Rabin Government see Yossi Goldstein, *Rabin, A Biography*, Tel Aviv, 2006, pp. 246–314; Robert Slater, *Rabin, A Biography*, Tel Aviv, 1993; Golani, *Secret Conversations*; Bar-Zohar, *Phoenix*, pp. 423–484.

arena merely to help him rescue the party's and his own standing. They felt that he knew that Golda would never run away from any responsibility and that her desire to serve the party as she had done for half a century would not allow her to refuse the call. Some even said that by roping Golda in, Rabin wanted to make sure that she would not criticize him or what was happening in the party. Those who argued thus did not know Golda. She made a habit of never criticizing the party in public. She preferred to settle accounts in smaller and closed forums. She knew that whatever happened in the party institutions was systematically leaked to the media in any case. "Everything is falling apart", she told her friends. "It makes me so sad". She felt that the party was committing suicide. In 1976, new and more startling revelations appeared. The man who Rabin proposed as the next Governor of the Bank of Israel, then Chairman of the Histadrut Sick Fund, Asher Yadlin, was charged with embezzling funds that he claimed were destined for the party coffers. During his trial, he argued in his defense that this had always been the system and that the party leaders were fully aware of these nefarious methods but preferred to ignore it in order not to be tainted by the slime. He was sentenced to five years' imprisonment. Another leader, Housing Minister Avraham Offer, who ran the Labor Party campaign headquarters in 1973, was also charged with illicit deals, a charge that turned out to be false. But he could not stand the pressure and in January 1977 committed suicide in his car on the Tel Aviv beach. His death was another blow to the many suffered by the party. Golda attended his funeral, her face frozen and her eyes dry.

Even the spectacular military achievement at Entebbe, in the course of which the IDF rescued some 100 Israeli and Jewish passengers who were hijacked on board an Air France flight making its way from Tel Aviv to Paris via Athens, did not do much to remedy the situation. The plane eventually made its way to Entebbe in Uganda, an airfield Golda had been to on a number of occasions. It was built by the Israeli company Solel Boneh. The world held its breath to see if Israel would cave in to the demands of the hijackers that in addition to being Palestinians also included several Germans. They were aided by none other than President Idi Amin. They asked that Israel release hundreds of Palestinian prisoners jailed there. The government met while outside the gates of the Defense Ministry in Tel Aviv the families of the hijacked passengers insisted that Israel accept the hijackers' demands. A story making the rounds in Tel Aviv said that Rabin consulted with Golda who told him, "if you don't have the courage to act, you are not fit to walk dogs in the street". She did not in fact say this, but it may have reflected her mood. In a daring action, an elite IDF unit was flown to Entebbe and succeeded in releasing the hostages on July 4, 1976. Golda was among the first to congratulate Rabin and sent him a huge bouquet of flowers. But the impact of this victory was soon torn to pieces when Rabin's and Peres's aides began to publicly argue who

was responsible for the decision to launch the military operation that electrified the world on the day when the United States was celebrating the bicentennial anniversary of its Declaration of Independence.

The relations between Peres and Rabin had sunk to their lowest point. The mutual accusations and recriminations were grist for the eager Israeli media. Golda was furious but decided not to intervene. The long-standing enmity between these two leaders derived not from disagreements over strategy and principles, but from personal reasons between two men who came from totally different backgrounds. On various occasions, Golda expressed her revulsion, but felt helpless and unable to influence the two men to cease their intrigues and infighting. She never liked Peres, but her appreciation of Rabin had by now somewhat declined. Rabin and Peres barely spoke to each other. At this point, the party Secretary General Meir Zarmi decided to tend his resignation. Rabin added to the fray when he angered Golda. In the course of a newspaper interview with a “highly senior source who knows the prime minister well,” Rabin said that when she was prime minister she was held prisoner by Dayan. Before she recovered from this slur, a cabinet crisis erupted. Four F-16 jet fighters recently acquired in America were late in arriving at an Israeli air force base and landed several minutes after the entry of the Sabbath. Because of this, in the absence of Peres who was abroad but in the presence of Rabin, some Knesset members from the Religious parties had to remain on the base rather than desecrate the Sabbath. They proposed a nonconfidence motion against the government which was adopted by 55 against 48. The nine National Religious Party Knesset members abstained, Rabin rightly thought that they had violated the principle of collective responsibility and fired their three ministers. He thus lost his Knesset majority. In order to avert losing additional nonconfidence motions, Rabin tended his resignation to President Katsir on December 21, 1976, and became the prime minister of a transition government that could not be toppled. The elections for the ninth Knesset due to be held in November 1977 were brought forward to May 17, 1977. The Labor Party began to organize for the coming critical contest.

Once again, Peres decided to challenge Rabin for the position of the party’s candidate for the office of prime minister. Another challenger was Eban. The assumption was that he was acting on behalf of Peres and at the right moment he would transfer his votes to Peres in return for a substantial position in the government Peres would put together. Golda Meir and Yehoshua Rabinovich tried to persuade Peres not to run in order to save the party from unnecessary shock on the eve of elections. He was told that you do not remove a sitting prime minister from his post. But he persisted and on January 11, 1977, announced his intention. There remained six weeks until the party’s convention that would select the candidate. Golda was selected to the Preparatory Committee, a purely honorary position that



did not improve her sagging spirits. In the discussion in the party bureau, she said: “I am afraid that people might ask me what’s happening in the party. Comrades will ask me: what’s happening to us, where will all this lead us?”<sup>6</sup>

Two other political developments took place around that time. The first was the election of Jimmy Carter as America’s new president and his decision to appoint Zbigniew Brzezinski as his National Security Adviser, replacing Henry Kissinger. That appointment had vast implications for America’s future Middle East policy, as it soon became apparent. The second development took place at home when Yigael Yadin, the second IDF chief of staff, current professor of archaeology at the Hebrew University and Ben-Gurion’s candidate to succeed him in the early 1960’s, announced his intention to establish a new political party. Initially it was named “The Democratic Movement,” but when it was joined by some of the veterans of the post-Yom Kippur Protest Movement, the party was renamed “The Democratic Movement for Change” (DMC). Soon its ranks were augmented by a large number of Labor Party members who thought that Labor would never be able to rejuvenate itself, and that the party was beyond resuscitation. Senior civil servants, retired IDF officers and all those who really wanted change now joined this new party. The new heads of the DMC had hoped that they would get enough seats in the next Knesset to enable them to enact new laws dealing with electoral reform. They hoped that Labor would help them to achieve this goal. After that, they hoped they could call for new elections under the new district system and lead the country to a better future. The DMC lacked a solid, meaningful and comprehensive ideology—something that would henceforth be the hallmark Israeli politics. The DMC basically represented the educated Ashkenazi, well-to-do segment of the population who resided in the wealthy sections of the major cities and in the growing prosperous suburbs; it attracted businessmen and professionals. It was, in fact, a new protest movement against the sinking Labor Party and its antics. The DMC also promised democracy within its own ranks. There would be open primaries to select its Knesset candidates, unlike the Arrangement Committee of the Alignment. Its leaders emphasised that they would focus on social and economic issues instead of foreign affairs and defense.

Golda participated in the discussions of the sub-committee for political affairs that formulated the party platform. Mapam threatened to leave the Alignment if the principle of territorial compromise was not included. Golda was furious and did not shy from confronting Yigal Allon on this issue. Allon claimed that there was no need to go to the people in case there were compromises in Judea and Samaria. Someone told him that Golda had made a commitment in

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<sup>6</sup> Avneri, *The Downfall*, p. 546.

the Knesset when she presented her last government in 1974 that in such a case the party would do just that, Allon responded: “This is not one of the Ten Commandments.” She reacted cynically: “God is my witness that I am not seeking an explosion with Mapam. We must do everything possible, but not the impossible. We and the people will not be able to accept that Mapam wishes to include that we are moving toward territorial compromises in Judea and Samaria. To the point, I made a commitment to seek a mandate for territorial compromise. I plead that this should not be changed”. The party found itself in an untenable situation and was rescued by the master formulator Galili, who offered the following formula: “The government would be prepared to move to compromise in all sectors”, without mentioning the West Bank. Mapam swallowed this phrasing.<sup>7</sup>

One day before the party convention, Golda announced her support for Rabin. The manner, timing and venue she chose to announce her support indicated how she felt about the primaries. During a visit to the Kibbutz Movement Educational Center in Efal, she said, “I do not disqualify any one of the two candidates. But I have my reasons why I supported Rabin the last time and why I support him now”. Then she added: “In a certain country the prime minister once retired. I asked who would succeed him and I was told that there were two candidates—one who deserved the position and the other who had a wonderful television personality. The one who had an impressive television personality was chosen. But to their and my regret, that party lost the government”.<sup>8</sup>

The Labor Party Convention opened in Jerusalem on February 21, 1977, in the presence of a number of very important overseas visitors. Among them were some of Golda’s socialist friends: The Dutch prime minister, Francois Mitterrand from France and the heads of the socialist parties in Germany, Italy and Britain. Golda was received by loud applause as she mounted the podium. But the atmosphere was somber and lacked excitement. The leaders spoke of lofty ideals and guiding principles that may have been applicable to a different era but had lost their meaning to the Israel of 1977. Outside, the heads of the Likud and DMC mocked Labor, saying that the party had lost its soul, direction and conscience and in any case was about to lose power. Golda chose not to speak in the opening session and left that to Rabin. As usual, he did not exude inspiration when he read his speech, even though he wrote it himself. Everybody now waited for the results of the Rabin-Peres contest, and both candidates did all in their power to woo the party delegates. Peres made many promises that included positions and honors if he won. Rabin promised less, but he too hinted of promotion and other benefits

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 589.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 591.

to his supporters. Golda did not even bother to attend the vote. The entire exercise was alien to her. Rabin won by a slim margin, he garnered 1445 votes while Peres was able to amass 1404 delegates. The gap was less than one percent; morally at least, Peres won the contest. On the stage, both candidates promised that they would now open a new chapter in their relations.

Assured of continued tenure as prime minister, Rabin flew to Washington for meetings with the heads of the Carter administration. Earlier, Golda had a private meeting with the new Secretary of State Cyrus Vance who came to Jerusalem to invite Rabin. The Rabin visit to Washington ended in a searing failure. He was unable to develop any chemistry with the new president, although he had predicted in 1973 that the then Georgia Governor Carter would one day sit in the White House. While Rabin was receiving an honorary doctorate from a distinguished Washington university, the president held a press conference in which he detailed his vision how to resolve the Arab-Israel conflict. He reached the conclusion that the Kissinger step-by-step approach had run its course and should be replaced by a comprehensive settlement between Israel and all its neighbors. In return for full-fledged peace treaties. Israel must withdraw the IDF from most of the territories and a Palestinian entity or homeland would have to be established side by side with Israel. The peace would be preserved by demilitarized zones on both sides of the border, United Nations forces, early warning stations and other appropriate security measures. Jerusalem was not mentioned. The ideas reflected those of a group of distinguished Americans who authored a document called “The Brookings Institute Report” in December 1975. The group included highly respected academics, former diplomats and businessmen, headed by Professor Zbigniew Brzezinski of Columbia University. When Rabin heard what the president said in the press conference, he asked Secretary of State Vance whether this represented a major change in America’s Middle East policy. Vance apologized and claimed that he had had no advance notice of what the president was about to propose. Rabin at once realized that once such a detailed plan was made public, the Arabs could not accept anything less and Israel’s bargaining ability was seriously hampered. In fact, there would be virtually nothing to negotiate about. The only achievement Rabin could claim was an American recognition that all this would take place in return for full peace and normalization of Israel-Arab relations.

Rabin also realized that Carter’s plan would be explosive in the hands of the Likud. Several weeks later, Rabin argued that Carter cost the Labor Party at least five Knesset seats. This journey was most unfortunate for Rabin for another reason. While he was still in Washington, the Ha’aretz correspondent in the American capital reported that Rabin and his wife held an account in a Washington bank that they opened when he was appointed ambassador to Washington in 1968.

This was in violation of Israel's foreign currency laws. There were some hints as to who sent the journalist to the bank branch, but that made little difference. The story spread like wildfire in Israel and embarrassed Rabin and his party. He initially admitted that the account was small but soon it transpired there was more than that and the Attorney General had no choice but to press charges against Leah Rabin. Rabin decided to stick by his wife and on April 7, announced in a radio and television live broadcast to the nation that he had decided to remove his name as the Labor Party candidate for the office of prime minister and would take a temporary leave. That was the last nail in Labor's coffin. It lost whatever remained of the public trust—the country's respected leader emerged as one who violated the laws of the land that he swore to uphold. Golda kept her reaction to her close friends and family. Her wrath was directed at Leah Rabin.

There remained six weeks to the elections. The Labor Party conducted a half-hearted, lame and uninspiring campaign. Golda barely took part in it. It was the first time since the 1920's that she did not actively participate in her movements' campaigns. She did appear in some public meetings, but the effort was too much for her and it was clear that she could not be true to herself. There were many issues for which she could find no answers. Labor had lost not only the country's intellectuals and upper crust, the professionals and the national religious, but also, and that was lethal, what was called "The Second Israel". The old pact between Labor and the National Religious Party was over as the latter became far more radicalized and found a new ally in the shape of the Likud. It was becoming clear that Labor was about to lose the election, but few predicted the smashing defeat it suffered at the hand of the voter.

Since Golda was still registered to vote in Jerusalem, she traveled to that city on May 17 and voted in her polling station. Then she went to the home of Lou Kadar and summoned Gideon Rafael for a chat. He was never one of her favorites, but she regarded his wisdom highly. She asked him whether there was the possibility that some Labor Party leaders would cross the line and move to Likud. He thought that one of the most likely candidates would be Moshe Dayan. She refused to believe that Dayan would do so.<sup>9</sup> In the afternoon, she returned to Ramat Aviv and spent the rest of the day watching television. At 10 pm the television announcer told the stunned Israelis that an historic political upset had taken place. Labor suffered a most humiliating defeat by losing 19 seats: it now held only 32 seats in the Knesset. The Likud did not gain much but rose from 39 to 43. The clear winner was the DMC that obtained 15 seats in its first attempt, an impressive gain but not enough to make a fundamental change in the new balance of power. The religious

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<sup>9</sup> Interview with IDF Radio, 6 May 1987.

parties won 15 seats. It was now evident that Labor would not be able to form the next coalition even with the support of the DMC. The moment the National Religious Party (12 seats) announced that they would support Begin, and once he was joined by Arik Sharon (with 2 mandates) and gained the support of the ultra-orthodox Agudat Israel, the Likud now had enough votes to form the next cabinet even without the DMC.

After decades in power, the Labor Party was trounced by the Likud and lost its hegemony. Menachem Begin was now the new democratically elected prime minister of Israel. Two days later, it was evident that Golda had made another wrong assessment. Moshe Dayan, who was elected to the Knesset as part of the Labor list, crossed the lines and agreed to serve as foreign minister in Begin's cabinet. This unprecedented move was called an act of political prostitution by one of Labor's leaders Yitzhak Ben-Aharon. Dayan could not see himself sitting and doing nothing for the next four years. He craved to return to center stage. This time, Golda was flabbergasted. This was the last thing she expected. She was much less angry when two of Rabin's loyal assistants decided to stay and serve Begin (they claimed they did so with Rabin's approval). She refused to make her views known in media interviews and reserved her feelings to her family and to the members of kibbutz Revivim. There she analyzed the reasons for Labor's downfall in a cold and sober manner and did not spare her own role on the eve of the Yom Kippur War that certainly contributed to the loss in the elections. She spoke of the growing gap between the leadership and the people and said that anyone who held a leadership position occasionally also made mistakes. The Israeli voter had brought in what she thought the wrong verdict and had decided that Labor had to go. She spoke sadly about herself. "I always said that my life was given to me like a gift from heaven. Now I am no longer that convinced. Why did I stay alive to see what happened to my movement?" Her only hope was that now, when Likud was in power, they would realize the meaning of national responsibility and would act totally different from the way they did when they sat in the opposition. She spoke warmly of Allon and Galili, but barely mentioned Rabin and Peres. She had not yet come to terms with the dimension of the landslide, although deep in her heart she knew that she was partly responsible for it.<sup>10</sup>

Labor did manage to retain its majority in the Histadrut governing institutions in elections held several weeks later. This time, Golda took a very active part in the campaign. She was determined to insure that the Histadrut would remain the last bastion of the Labor Party. Prior to the Histadrut elections, in June, she paraded alongside Rabin, Peres and Allon in the streets of Tel Aviv. The victory in

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<sup>10</sup> Dan Arkin, "The Golda of Revivim", *Ma'ariv*, 15 December 1978.

the Histadrut elections gave her a good feeling that perhaps the Likud victory was temporary and that the Israeli voted would come to realize that he had punished Labor in vain and that soon they would be back and once again rule Israel in the name of sane Zionism. But for the next four years, Labor would have to get used to four years of Likud rule.

In the midst of all these historic events, Golda underwent another very unpleasant experience. In May 1976, the well-known American playwright William Gibson met Golda in New York. He was deeply impressed and later wrote in a book that the moment he saw her he admired her, a grandmother half his size, massive as a rock. She exuded natural strength without moving her little finger.<sup>11</sup> He decided to write a play based on her life and came to Israel in August 1976 for a series of interviews. During this visit, he noticed that Golda was quite apathetic to the entire enterprise, perhaps because her intuition told her the play would fail. But he persisted and began to write the play in October 1976. One day, Golda said to him, “If the play succeeds, you will make me famous.” The actress Anne Bancroft was engaged to play the lead role. The contract said that Golda would have the right to veto only the headings of the play. A first reading was held in Lou Kadar’s home in Jerusalem. Golda asked that she be given a chance to read the play once more with her family in Ramat Aviv. Copies of the play were sent to the two women whom Gibson called Golda’s literary assistants—Rina Samuel and Marie Syrkin. Prior to meeting Secretary of State Cyrus Vance in Jerusalem in March 1977, she went over the text again with Gibson. The reading lasted two-and-a-half hours. He noted that at times she growled, smoked and said that “it’s amazing, I hear as though it is someone else”. He was asked to remove one very painful item, which he did. In late March 1977, he read the play again to Golda, her family, her physician and close friends and Rina Samuel. Anne Bancroft came to Israel and spent ten days with Golda to learn her movements, speech inflection and her behavior. Rehearsals began in August. When the play opened in Baltimore, it received the worst reviews Gibson had ever gotten. The critics said that the acting and the idea were not good and that the play was talkative, boring, lacked direction and was confused. Bancroft was praised, although one of the critics wrote that the text was not very helpful to her. Gibson sat down to re-write the play. At some point he told Golda that he hoped that Dayan would not be angry over one scene that takes place during the Yom Kippur War. Her reaction was terse: “Let him write his own play”. Dayan did not like some parts, having been informed about them by Dinitz, and even met with Gibson. The new

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<sup>11</sup> William Gibson, Notes on how to Turn a Phoenix into Ashes, the Story of the Stage Production, with the Text, of “Golda”, New York, 1978, p. 3.

version of the play opened in Boston this time, to full houses, loud applause and very poor reviews. Some of the critics felt that the play was far from being perfect, it was like preaching from the stage. One review hurt Golda, although it was close to the truth. The reviewer wrote that the play dealt with a very distinguished woman, but no longer controversial, of a country that was no longer the center of fashion.

Finally, the play arrived in New York, where according to Gibson they were burned alive, crucified and still remained alive. He pleaded with Golda not to come especially for the opening. But she was coming to New York in any case for a series of appearances. The next evening, wrote Gibson, Golda, in an evening gown was the star at a gala dinner organized by Israel Bonds that had been planned several months in advance and was expected to raise six million dollars. When that part of the evening was over, Golda and her retinue proceeded to the theater where she sat like a marble stone and turned the entire house to stone. Two days later, they all met at her hotel—Sarah, Menachem, Lou, Marie and Rina. Rina had just arrived from Israel and very excitedly told those present of an accident she almost had when the plane in which she was flying lost an engine. Golda reacted icily: “You think you were in an accident”. She then proceeded to express her views of the play saying it was false and her portrayal by Bancroft showed an old, weak, limping woman dragging her feet, too much of a Yiddishe Mome, she added that had she looked and behaved as Anne Bancroft played her, she would never have been elected prime minister of Israel.<sup>12</sup> The reviews in New York were negative although the play continued to run for several more weeks. The one who saved Golda from this disgrace was none other than Anwar Sadat who announced that he was intending to visit Jerusalem. Gibson did not give up, and twenty-five years later, in March 2003, a new version of the play was mounted in New York called “Golda’s Kitchen”, this time with the actress Tova Feldshuh. It was an immediate hit and won raving reviews. One reviewer said that “Golda symbolizes an entire nation.”

In July 1977, Begin and Carter met in the White House and agreed to renew the peace process through an international conference in Geneva that would focus on a comprehensive settlement to resolve once and for all the Arab-Israel conflict. Begin praised Carter, who he said reminded him of none other than Zeev Jabotinsky. This remark raised quite a few eyebrows in Israel. The aim was to meet in Geneva no later than the end of 1977 and efforts were now directed at the preparation for this conference—procedure, list of invitees, agenda, UN role, hosts, duration and the level of representation. Soon the United States and

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34.

Israel found themselves on a collision course because the Americans wanted to involve the Soviet Union in the proceedings and the Russians insisted that the conference focus on the implementation of Security Council Resolution 242 in all its parts. Before that, Dayan met secretly in Morocco with the Egyptian deputy prime minister Hassan Tohami who understood from Dayan that in return for full peace, Israel would be prepared to return virtually all of Sinai. Sadat drew much encouragement from this. He had also heard by then from the Romanian President Ceausescu, from the Shah of Iran and from Carter, that there was a new and strong leader in Israel who could not only sign a peace treaty but even more importantly, would deliver it. Sadat may have come to the conclusion that at some point he should meet Begin.

Golda expressed her views of the Begin government in an interview she granted to “Ma’ariv” on October 14, shortly after the United States and the Soviet Union issued a joint declaration about resuming the Geneva conference and Israel agreed to their terms. She thought that the Begin government had made a mistake when it decided to make peace with all the Arab states simultaneously.

It’s an amazing thing. Is this what we deserve after five wars and vicious hatred? We all dream of it, but is it serious? Is it possible? Is there a cabinet minister or a citizen with normal intelligence who believes it? It is not serious...this government climbs on high trees and then cannot descend from them, it tries to descend—it makes additional bad mistakes. They say that there is nothing to talk about in the West Bank and therefore they cannot follow a road, that even though it’s not ideal, it’s the only possibility at this stage: additional interim agreements. Had this government been realistic, it would have understood that in the Middle East you cannot attain what you want and have to be satisfied with what is available. Really, I do not want to insult the prime minister and the ministers.. I am far from it...but to be so unserious...I do not get it... They will get peace in Geneva? They prepared a draft peace treaty and banged the drums that for the first time a government prepares a peace draft, nu, really, there are lovely things there, we all want open borders and diplomatic relations and trade, lovely, but there is no word about the borders and the territories—small matter, that Carter certainly is not interested in. Is this a draft peace treaty?

She rejected bogus American threats and mentioned her own experience in repelling threats. She repeated her mantra that a peace conference in Geneva with all the factors was a recipe for disaster because the position of the radical Arabs would be the one that would dominate, and if the conference exploded, Israel would be blamed. She feared that if the Palestinians came to Geneva as a separate element, it could cost Israel dearly. This was her reaction to the Israeli-American formula of involving only those Palestinians acceptable to all parties in Geneva. Her position was that Israel must tell the United States in no uncertain terms that under these terms Israel would not go to Geneva. “Let this government get up at midnight minus one minute and tell the United States and the whole world we



shall not sign peace in Geneva. There will be no progress in Geneva. This Geneva conference under the circumstances is a recipe for failure that would place Israel in a bind and will bring war closer; therefore we are not going there under these terms". This was Golda at her best, when she attacked the Likud and their spiritual fathers, the Zionist Revisionists. She said: "It's nothing new...there is always the talk, the call, the word—the tools of the Revisionist movement, the deeds were done by the Labor movement. This division of labor has not changed even now".<sup>13</sup>

Of the greatest of ironies, the one who agreed with her assessment was Sadat. He saw the United States' decision to involve the Soviet Union in the peace process as yielding to the radical Arab states headed by Syria. Later, he admitted that he feared that Geneva would be an endless and useless conference where the tone would be dictated by the Arab extremists. In this situation, Israel would refuse to withdraw from the territories and the stalemate that would ensue would invite another war whose outcome could never be predicted. He knew that Israel could no longer be surprised on the battlefield. Once again, he would have to undertake a very dramatic step to force the United States to follow his lead. On November 9, 1977, he made a dramatic announcement in the Egyptian People's Assembly with Yasser Arafat in the audience:

I state in all seriousness that I am prepared to go to the end of the world—and Israel will be surprised to hear me tell you that I am ready to go to their home, to the Knesset itself...to argue with them, in order to prevent one Egyptian soldier from being wounded. Members of the People's Assembly, we have no time to lose.

Begin wisely invited Sadat to come to Jerusalem. Golda heard about this in New York and was full of doubts. To Gibson she said: "He will come and make a good impression and leave us looking bad, and that is dangerous for us". In the course of a luncheon given in her honor by the Consul General of Israel in Boston in the presence of the former American ambassador to Israel Walworth Barbour, she again expressed fears that Sadat's visit was a trick to influence international and primarily American public opinion. She had every reason to be angry that Sadat would come to Jerusalem and meet with Begin and Dayan, and not with her, Rabin, and Peres. The Labor Party was now totally out of the peace process and could not even influence its evolution and outcome. When Sadat announced that he was arriving in Israel on November 19, she cancelled all her appearances in America and flew home to Tel Aviv arriving a day before Sadat.

On Saturday night, she was among a line of Israelis who greeted Sadat as he stepped out of his airplane. She stood next to Rabin and General Gur. When Sadat

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<sup>13</sup> Ma'ariv, 14 October 1977.

drew near to her, accompanied by a smiling Begin, he shook her hand warmly and she said to him simply: “I am glad you came. We have waited for you a long time”. He replied that conditions had not been ripe yet. The next day, she attended the festive Knesset meeting and listened to his speech, to the replies of Begin and Peres. A day later, when Sadat met with the entire Knesset Labor Faction, she sat at the head of the table next to him, with Rabin and Peres, now the chairman of the Labor Party. When she spoke, she stole the show.

You have come telling us that from now on you are prepared to live in peace with us. I can assure you, Mr. President, that as far as we are concerned, the desire for peace, the hope for peace and the dream of peace have never left the heart of a single one of us. We have come back to this country to live in peace. We have come back to this country to live. We have come back to this country to create. In this room, you will see people who, for the first time in their lives, have climbed hills and planted trees in this country... I can say in all sincerity that we have never desired additional territory. We have always been prepared to live within our own existing boundaries. We will not go into history today, but what we want to tell you is that we were and are prepared for territorial compromises on all our borders—with one condition: these borders will give us security and protect us from danger so that we will never be in need, God forbid, at any time of help from abroad in order to defend ourselves. The blood that has been shed, to our sorrow, has been our own. We don't want to shed the blood of others.<sup>14</sup>

In front of television cameras from all over the world, it now seemed that the grandfather and grandmother, once bitter enemies, had found paths to the hearts of each other. Golda handed him a small gift for his newborn granddaughter and said that he had always called her the “old lady”. He laughed heartily and admitted to it. Sadat later reported to his aides that he had been deeply impressed by her personality and realized that Rabin, Peres and others held her in awe and respect. That morning, Golda was at her best. Surrounded by her admirers, now joined by Anwar Sadat, she was the opposite of the more formal and theatrical Begin, her simple words over his more bombastic statements. But when the hour of this spiritual uplift was over, it was Begin as prime minister who would now conduct the negotiations. It was hard for Golda and the other leaders of the Labor Party to come to terms with the new reality, of sitting at the margins, watching the great drama from the wings, with no one asking for their advice or volunteering to provide them with pieces of information. They did not want to appear as the mourners among the celebrants, now they had to understand that they would be sitting in the opposition for a long time. It would take fifteen years before Labor would come back to power, but then only for three brief years that ended with Rabin's assassination in November 1995.

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<sup>14</sup> Text of Golda speech to Sadat, 21 November 1977, Medzini, Documents, Vol. IV, pp. 201–204.

The Labor leaders with the rest of the Israelis watched with growing alarm the peace process that had started with a bang and had now become a whimper and threatened to derail completely. Begin could never accept the Egyptian demands for giving the Palestinians an entire and total withdrawal from all the territories. In January 1978, the political talks were frozen while the military talks continued in Cairo. Israel-America relations had once again sunk to the bottom and open enmity now prevailed between Carter and Begin.

In early May 1978, Golda celebrated her 80<sup>th</sup> birthday, shortly afterwards, Israel celebrated the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its founding. Golda felt that this was not the time for public celebrations and allowed just one public event in kibbutz Revivim. The Israel Chamber Orchestra, consisting mostly of immigrants who had recently come from the Soviet Union, played Beethoven's *Eroica* and Haydn's 92<sup>nd</sup> Symphony. Golda then asked for the floor and spoke quietly to the hushed crowd:

I will take a few minutes before we shall all enjoy what awaits us this evening, only to express my thanks for what I have attained. I gained private things: family, grandchildren, my sister's sons, her grand- and great- grandchildren. All warm, good, each one follows the right way, people of the movement, tillers of the soil. And I am grateful for the privilege of my belonging. I want to believe that I was accepted as belonging to the family of the land, toilers of the land, in kibbutzim and moshavim in all parts of the land, none of them had anything when they settled, exactly as Revivim had nothing but sand.

And I want to thank you for the privilege, even if I had not traveled with you all the way, but I knew and know every day that this is the true foundation of what we have, for the state of Israel, for the freedom of Israel, for independence, yes...another *dunam* and another goat and another chicken. Small things. Not outstanding. But they believed that this was the way, and how right they were, and they brought us here. And I want to thank for the privilege that I am allowed—so I think—to name it thus, my belonging to the family of this house, the sons of Revivim. I remember visits to Revivim that were not always satisfactory, the arguments over basic things, and it seemed that we would never attain a common language...and here this too came about. We have arrived. This does not mean that every Revivim member thinks like me or I like them. That each one of them really believes in his way, and if that is so, the roads will never intersect but there are several things on which there can be no arguments. That is the sense of care due to the feeling of responsibility for the existence of the people of Israel, the knowledge that Israel's security, without it being strong, able and willing to defend itself, even when it will be alone. We must assume that if, God forbid, there was such a time, and the state was alone, I think there can be no disagreement over this. But more than that, each one of us wants to reach that day when the reality between us and our neighbors would be one of peace, only peace. I think there can be no argument over that, even if we have differences of opinions on how to reach that great day..

Here stands before you a woman not that young any more, and there are in this hall personal friends, very close, very dear, and I found it necessary to take few moments just to tell you, each and every one of you, that I am aware of this privilege, I do not accept this evening

as something due to me, but as a great gift, as though all my life was paved with big gifts, expensive, that I keep all of them in my heart in the image of this friend or group, and to all of you thank you and Shalom.<sup>15</sup>

Her attention, like that of many Israelis, was now focused on the peace process that had become almost completely frozen. Carter and Sadat blamed Begin for the impasse, and the Israel Labor Party confirmed the charges that the Israeli prime minister was tough, rigid, inflexible, intransigent, a formalist and unyielding. In the past, these epithets had been used to describe Golda Meir. When the talks were stalemated, the Labor Party decided to intervene. Peres met Sadat in the course of the meetings of the Socialist International (of which Peres was now a vice president), to which, miracle of miracles, the party of the Egyptian president that was called the Socialist Union Party also belonged. With the help of Willy Brandt and Bruno Kreisky, a document was drafted that was to be presented to Sadat to break the deadlock. The “Vienna Document”, as it was called, would be an Israeli-Egyptian agreement to accept Resolution 242 and Carter’s declaration in Aswan of January 4, 1978, as a basis for the resumption of the talks. Sadat and Peres thought this was a positive step, although formally they never adopted it. They left this to their respective parties. In Israel, a discussion was held in the three major forums of the Labor Party: the Political Committee, the Bureau and the Central Committee. Peres asked that the document be approved, but he encountered some opponents, chief among them Golda Meir. She argued that while the “Vienna Document” was better than previous decisions of the Socialist International, she had serious doubts whether they should adopt it instead of what appeared in their party platform. “There is, for example, the solution of the Palestinian problem in all its aspects. Does this still mean a Palestinian state”?

Five days later, on July 23, 1978, she spoke at length in a meeting of the Central Committee. She took her time to repeat in fact her political views on the entire issue of the Arab-Israel conflict. She may have felt that this could well be one of the last opportunities to speak and to make her political testament. The speech, too long to be fully reproduced, contained her well-known views on Israel’s minimal demands. It was replete with personal memoirs of the 1930’s and 1940’s, of leaders she had met, of events she had been part of. It rambled on for a long time, was not constructed in a logical or chronological manner, but she felt these were the things she had to stress.

She again emphasised certain elements that Israel could never give up—strategic depth, the ability to defend herself from defensible boundaries. She wanted a Jewish state with a Jewish majority albeit with an Arab minority living

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<sup>15</sup> Golda Meir Booklet—Collection from the Daily Newspapers, Tel Aviv, 1979.

among the Jews that enjoyed full rights. She castigated Begin for offering to withdraw almost fully from Sinai, remove Jewish settlements and even airforce bases. She was totally opposed to Begin's autonomy plan for the Palestinians. Golda ended her hour-long speech by saying:

Dear comrades, I wish that despite this government, we shall attain peace. But, that we should retreat from those things we consider necessary to insure peace? Without causing injustice to the other side, we must insist on these things and do all that the labor movement can do to rush and demand of this government to embark on a new road. If, God forbid, no—I am convinced that the Jewish people is a clever people and will not be able to bear this situation for a long time. As long as this is an elected government that has a majority in the Knesset, it is the government of Israel. We are in opposition to the government, not to the State of Israel, not to Israel's security, and upon this we must insist henceforth.<sup>16</sup>

The “Vienna Document” never served as the basis for the resumption of the peace process. Begin was livid when he heard of the Sadat-Peres meeting and was furious when he heard that Peres met with the King of Morocco Hassan II and that he also wanted to meet with King Hussein. Begin rightly accused the leaders of the Labor Party of thinking they were still running Israel's foreign policy. Finally, after many ups and downs, much anger and recrimination, bitterness and harsh words bandied between Israel, Egypt and the United States, President Carter decided in a last-ditch effort to rescue the entire process by inviting Begin and Sadat to meet with him at Camp David. Begin accepted, and so did Sadat, under condition that the United States would be fully involved in the talks, not just an independent and neutral observer. From September 5–17, 1977, the three leaders were ensconced in Camp David. There were no leaks, but from rumors that were spread, it appeared that Begin had made excessive and very painful concessions. Golda followed these developments with growing apprehension. Once again, how ironic it was that Begin, who often accused Golda for being far too compromising, was now about to make massive concessions in a closed meeting with no prior cabinet or Knesset approval. He was about to give up every inch in Sinai in return for a peace treaty with Egypt. She only hoped he would act in a responsible manner. While Begin was arguing in Camp David over every word and comma, Golda embarked on her final battle, this time against death. Her cancer, in remission for fifteen years, had erupted and spread in her worn-out body.

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<sup>16</sup> In the Labor Party Central Committee, 23 July 1978.

## 21 Our Golda Is No More (1978)

Golda entered Hadassah Hospital in the West Jerusalem suburb of Ein Kerem in August 1978. She knew this place very well, having been treated there weekly for many years. She received a private room in the Oncology Institute named after Moshe Sharett, who had died there in 1965. As usual, the announcement made by the hospital was laconic. Mrs. Meir was undergoing tests. Public attention in any case was focused on the forthcoming Camp David summit conference between Begin, Sadat and Carter. The public was almost used to the news of her frequent hospitalizations and that suited Golda. She was allowed to go home three times and spent these “leaves” with her family in Ramat Aviv. But as the pains became increasingly unbearable, she was forced to return to Jerusalem and continue her treatment. Her last public appearance was on September 18, 1978, the day after the signing of the Camp David Framework Accords in the White House. This historic document determined that Israel would give up all of Sinai, including the military installations and settlements, in return for a full-scale peace treaty with Egypt, to be negotiated within three months. The treaty was to include all the elements of normalization such as diplomatic and trade relations, open borders, free flow of people and goods, freedom of navigation in both the Suez Canal and the Straits of Tiran, demilitarization of most of Sinai and the end of hostile propaganda.

As for the West Bank and Gaza, the Accords stipulated that there would be a five-year transition period during which time the Israeli military government would be withdrawn and replaced by a self-governing Palestinian authority elected by the inhabitants. This autonomous regime would be in force for five years. At the beginning of the third year, representatives of Egypt, Israel, Jordan, and the elected Palestinian representatives would negotiate the determination of the final status of these territories. Jerusalem was not mentioned in the accords, nor was the future of the Israeli settlements in the West Bank and Gaza or future sovereignty and the deployment of the IDF at the end of the five-year transition period.

The country was in a state of euphoria. Begin had done the unexpected and seemingly impossible, he brought peace with Egypt, something that had eluded Labor leaders over the years. He had done the unbelievable. He signed a document which also included his recognition of the “legitimate rights of the Palestinians and their just requirements”. Few believed that Begin signed this paragraph. The leaders of his own party, Herut, were quick to dissociate themselves from the Accords and blamed the “foreign saplings”—Moshe Dayan, Ezer Weizman and Aharon Barak—with destructive influence over Begin, as though he was an innocent lamb.

The Labor Party was stunned. Its leadership bureau met on September 18 to decide the party's position when the Knesset would have to approve the accords. The discussion was long and painful. There was elation over the prospective peace with Egypt, but also the realization that all the Israelis would have to be evacuated from Sinai and that all the military installations and civilian settlements would be dismantled. It was finally decided to recommend to the party's Central Committee not to vote against the treaty but to allow the Labor's Knesset members' freedom of choice. The discussion was bitter and Golda was at her best. When Peres argued that the Labor Party bore much moral responsibility for the Rafiah Salient settlements, and equally for the settlers in the Jordan Valley and the West Bank, she interjected: "All the settlers in the Jordan Valley and the Rafiah Salient went there in the name of the government. Clearly it was also in the name of the Movement, but there was a decision on each and every one of the settlements".<sup>1</sup> A long list of speakers preceded her, as she sat there listening to them making their comments in favor or against the removal of settlements. She understood that the party bore responsibility for the settlements and settlers alike, but they could stand in the way of achieving peace, something that Begin was credited with. She may have feared that to the average Israeli, the Labor Party would appear mean and petty in face of the great Begin achievement. It was clear that for the attainment of peace, the settlements in Sinai would have to be removed. It was hard for her to conceive of such a possibility and she decided to make her views known:

In the future if someone will read today's meeting protocols, he will be utterly confused and will deem that confused people met here today and he whoever beat himself more was the hero. What are we beating ourselves for? Why didn't we bring peace, why could peace not be had been achieved with us? That Begin broke up the Government of National Unity over what? Because we accepted the cease-fire and recognized 242 and obtained equipment for the IDF unimaginable at the time. On this he got up and smashed the dishes. This very Begin who three months ago, when Carter said you have to accept 242 first, replied—never. I want to use a vulgar strong word: It is vulgar to say that we do not begrudge Begin the peace and that we are frustrated. Really, what are we talking about? I did not hear that Peres led off with this that we have to say no to peace. Should we be for peace? What are we talking about? There are comrades here from the Rafiah Salient, what has changed, or maybe we have understood nothing.

I have nothing against those comrades who have always agreed to peace based on the 1967 borders. Ben-Aharon, do you know when the 1967 borders of the West Bank were determined? On this miserable day when the Likud Government decided on the autonomy. What was agreed on the autonomy was the return to the 1967 lines and there is autonomy on the

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<sup>1</sup> This section is based on Golda Meir Booklet, op.cit.

other side of the 1967 borders. I don't accept fear of peace. I have never accepted it and don't accept it now. The People of Israel don't deserve that the day which holds the hopes for peace will also be a day of sadness, and they don't deserve this. This day should be one of happiness.

She then went on to reiterate that those who settled in the Rafiah Salient were sent there for security reasons, on a security mission. She icily asked if she had to run every time Moshe Dayan changed his mind. He once claimed that Sharm el-Sheikh was more important than peace with Egypt, now he claimed the opposite. She argued that it was perverse to posit peace against the settlements. It was the lowest form of demagogy when people told the settlers to get off the land because they were an obstacle to peace.

I have heard no proposal for voting against peace, but should we not tell the truth? Our Movement occasionally erred, but never lied. This can't be said about the government which conducted the negotiations. I must say that I don't recall such a thing in Israel since 1947, before and after. There was a prime minister, not as magic or strong as Begin, but there was such a prime minister—Ben-Gurion. Without a cabinet meeting, without prior discussions, three ministers sit down in Camp David, get no instructions from the cabinet, and decide what they decide and all is well. They are not even in a rush to report to the cabinet. And now there are ministers who say they did know or were not told. But we are a democratic regime. Let them come, report to the cabinet, let them go to the Knesset, and Begin is the epitome of democracy, he will hold his peace and tell the Knesset members they can do what they want. I hope that we shall use every means permitted in parliament not to let him play this game. He has to answer whether without the Rafiah settlements there will be peace, vote first on peace and then decide to remove the settlements, is that the problem? I think we should carry out a true analysis without prettifying things, without demagogy.

Menachem Hacoen says, thank God we lost the May 17 elections, because if we had made such concessions, there would be pogroms in the country. Maybe, but I propose that we start praying that May 17 be a day of prayer, when God did us a favor by not hurting us. We need a true and not a demagogic analysis. The people have to know the price they are paying and will pay in the future. I hope Begin did not forget that Jerusalem is the Capital city, what did he promise, what did he sign? What is the agreement all about? What else will they want from us? Maybe it is already irrelevant, but Jerusalem is still relevant and there were things we said we cannot do without.

I want to tell the comrades from Yamit and the Rafiah Salient: Whatever happens, the years you worked and built there, cannot be forgotten. It is not your fault, nor the fault of the Movement that concessions were made regarding borders. There is democracy and the Knesset will decide. You went there as emissaries, not of the party but of the nation and of all cabinets between 1967 and 1977. They went there on a State's mission because they believed in this. I know there was a cabinet decision on each settlement, always from the security angle, exactly as it was on the Jordan Rift. It is permissible to have fear in one's heart. I am not afraid of peace; I am afraid of the terms that make up the peace. Let us say that Sadat



really wants peace. I heard Ezer Weizman's testimony and I accept it. Does he have opposition? The ministers who resigned or did not resign, don't they reflect the problem?

We cannot start to negotiate anew. I am convinced that even if Sadat had come earlier, it would have been possible to run things differently. Maybe he would not have come, because I can't imagine anyone of us would have promised him prior to his coming that he had Sinai in his pocket. He would not have come. Wasn't this a false deal? Wasn't this a deal 'take Sinai and give me the West Bank'? Wasn't this the basis for this deal? But this is a mystic dream and things should not be presented in such a way as though there are those who don't want peace. Does this derive from frustration over the fact that we didn't achieve this? Woe to us, if I thought there was anyone willing to give up peace because he did not bring it. We simply have to be honest with ourselves and educate our younger generation that not all are deals, and there are things that you go on believing in even after you must make concessions. Truth does not stop to be truth if within a certain situation which cannot be changed concessions have to be made...<sup>2</sup>

The long and often rumbling speech, was very emotional and highly disorganized as she jumped from one subject to another. She may have felt this was the last chance to discuss the three issues she had dealt with for years: peace, Arabs and settlements. In brief, she said that she would have never have negotiated in the way the talks were conducted in Camp David. She claimed that the public was not told the truth—a somewhat strange assertion since for years she had been very niggardly in divulging to the public secret contacts and undertakings. She argued rightly that the decision-making process was distorted and that Begin signed the agreement without prior cabinet or Knesset approval, having made huge concessions. She conceded simply that the Labor Party could not be seen as being opposed to the agreement merely because it was Begin who signed it but demanded to know the entire truth behind Camp David. She understood that her party had no other way but to grit its teeth and vote for the agreement. She would never have signed such a document, not because she was against peace, but because she felt it lacked sufficient guarantees and assurances for Israel's security. At this stage, she failed to realize that Sadat had also made major concessions and in fact was removed from the Arab League for accepting Israel's existence and getting back Egyptian territories whose sovereignty Israel had never claimed. She regretted the loss of Sharm el-Sheikh and the land strip from Eilat to the Straits of Tiran, but held no sentimental attachment to Sinai. She saw in it merely an important security zone for Israel. An analysis of this last speech, and comparing it to her 1937 Zionist Congress speech, shows that she had not progressed much in her thinking about the attitude of the Arab world to Israel. She never believed in the possibility of Israel-Arab peace in her generation. She assumed that much

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<sup>2</sup> In the Labor Party Secretariat, 18 September 1978.

time would elapse before peace would come. In this respect, her thinking was similar to that of Sadat until he decided, mainly as a result of the 1973 war, to take a shortcut and come to Jerusalem. This final speech was not given much publicity and few really cared what she thought about the agreement. By then she and her views were no longer relevant.

Ten days later, at the conclusion of a 28-hour marathon debate in the Knesset, 84 Knesset members voted for the Accords, 19 opposed and 17 abstained. The main opponents came from Herut and included Moshe Arens, Yoram Aridor, Geula Cohen and Yigal Horowitz who also resigned his post as minister of commerce and industry. The Speaker of the Knesset, Yitzhak Shamir, abstained, but his objection to the agreement was well known. Golda followed the discussions avidly from news reports and conversations with family and friends. She was back in the hospital for more treatments and went home briefly in mid-October. Her last interview, to “Ma’ariv” correspondent Dov Goldstein, was given on the phone. She reminded him of a conversation she had with him on the subject of death.<sup>3</sup> She wanted to die peacefully and in dignity. She remembered how her mother and older sister had ended their lives, cut off from their surroundings for many years. She was determined to avoid this. She often said to her staff: “Who among you will have the guts to tell me that I am not longer functioning properly”? She knew the nature of her illness and wanted to spare her family and friends the agony of a prolonged death. Her doctors obeyed her wishes that there would be no public discussion of her illness. Cancer and death were entirely personal matters.

On the eve of returning to the hospital, she was visited by an old friend over the decades, Ya’acov Hazan, whom Golda liked very much. He described their parting:

In our last meeting, about a week before she went back to hospital, I noticed she did not receive me as in the past. Carefully dressed, almost formally, as though ready for a special reception, I asked after her health. For the first time, I did not hear her usual answer: fine, but ‘not so good. I realize lately that you need lots of strength to bear the burden of weakness, but let’s not talk about it’. We carried on the conversation, now briefly as I felt her weaken. When I rose to leave, she said suddenly: ‘Come Hazan, let’s kiss...’<sup>4</sup>

He was convinced she knew it would be their last meeting. On October 24, she went back to the hospital for the last time, once again installed in room 25 on the fourth floor of the Sharett Institute. She asked for and received a television

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<sup>3</sup> Ma’ariv, 10 December 1978.

<sup>4</sup> Tamir, ed., Golda, pp. 40–41.

set, which she watched. She tried to read the newspapers and displayed keen awareness of political developments connected with the peace process. She saw few visitors, among them the president of Israel and leaders of the Labor Party. The family was with her all the time. There were hours in which she asked to be alone. She expressed the hope of remaining alive until the signing of the Israeli-Egyptian peace treaty and followed closely the convoluted negotiations on the treaty in Washington. To her dying day, she was convinced that the Begin government had made many mistakes in the negotiations. When she was told that Begin and Sadat had won the Nobel Peace Prize, she sent Begin her congratulations, and to those close to her she said: "They don't deserve the Nobel Prize. At best they deserve the Oscar".

As the media demanded information about her health, she refused to authorize any communiqué: "My state of health is my own concern. The people have enough problems at this time". The Israeli reporters were prepared to accept the formula that Mrs. Meir was undergoing tests. But their editors began to compile her obituary.

One day, she heard noise outside her room. A dusty paratrooper arrived from his unit and asked to see her. He was stopped by her bodyguards. He brought flowers and the well-wishes of his unit. She insisted on seeing him and inquired about himself, his unit and the army's morale. For a while it looked as though she was back visiting the frontlines. When he left, she cried. By mid-November, word about her illness spread worldwide. Thousands of letters, postcards and telegrams arrived from the four corners of the earth. Orchids came from Hawaii and roses from Canada. They were sent to other wards in the hospital: "At least this will make people happy".

She weakened. One day, she said to Shimon Peres: "It was said that I am made of steel. But steel also weakens occasionally". An Israeli reporter phoned to get her views on the peace process. She responded by saying: "I have much to say, but not in hospital. I shall choose the proper time and place". Cables arrived from Henry Kissinger, Gerald Ford, Senator Jackson, European leaders and even from the tiny Jewish community in Cairo. A number of Soviet Jews succeeded in phoning her and asked that the woman who lit the beacon not give up the struggle. In her final days she was sedated, spoke with her family, watched television and hoped that death would deliver her from the pain.

In early December, she lapsed into longer periods of coma, a situation she had dreaded for years. The medications spared her the pains. But the cancer spread rapidly. On Tuesday, December 5, she was still conscious to watch the television show "Music from Jerusalem" taped in the Jerusalem Music Center which she loved. It was appropriate that the last television show she watched was classical music. She then sunk into a coma. This development released the

editors from their self-imposed censorship and the public was informed that the aging leader was in her final hours. As she sunk, Menachem Begin was about to travel to Oslo to receive his Nobel Prize. Sadat preferred to stay at home and sent a close adviser instead. Begin left Israel on Friday, December 8, in the morning. He was told that Golda had few hours remaining. He made arrangements to obtain news of her condition on his airplane.

She died on that day, at 16:28, shortly after the onset of the Sabbath. With her were her sister Clara, Sarah, Menachem, Aya, Zecharia, Judy, Yona and Lou Kadar. Her death was announced on the 6 pm news and the country went into mourning. President Navon and Deputy Prime Minister Yadin rushed to the hospital to comfort the family. Clara collected Golda's clothes and went to Regina's house in Jerusalem. On the dining room door in kibbutz Revivim a brief notice was pinned: "Our Golda is no more".

Condolence and tribute cables started flowing. Among the first who sent his condolences to President Navon, Prime Minister Begin, and the family was her former rival, Anwar Sadat. Writing to her children, Sadat noted:

I received with deep sorrow the news of the death of Mrs. Golda Meir and I send to you my heartfelt condolences. I must record for history that she has been a noble foe during the phase of confrontation between us, which we all hope has ended forever. While we are working to achieve a total and a permanent peace for the people of the area, I must mention she had an undeniable role in starting this peace process when she signed with us the first disengagement agreement. She has always proved that she was a political leader of the first category, worthy of occupying her place in your history and worthy of the place she occupied in your leadership. I repeat my condolences to you.

News of her death spread to the United States and led all other news items. President Carter issued a statement saying that "Mrs. Meir embodied the best of the Israeli spirit". In a cable to President Navon, Carter wrote: "Golda engaged the hearts of the American people as no other leader of a nation has ever done. Her warmth, spirit and brave work for the cause of Israel drew our two people together... Golda's gift was extended beyond the bound of her people. She spoke to all humanity". Vice President Mondale noted that she had a "universal conscience... a humanity and leadership which impressed us all—Israelis and Americans alike. Golda will stand like Judith in the chronicles of the modern era. Her career helped bind together Israel and America". Secretary of State Cyrus Vance was impressed by her "wisdom, her humor, her indomitable spirit, her bravery caught the imagination of people everywhere. Of course Golda Meir held a special place in the hearts of Americans. She grew up in this country and when she left to take up the great task of nation-building in Israel, she made her work into real and symbolic expression of the unbreakable bonds between our people".

Former President Nixon felt that Israel might have not have survived without the critical leadership of Mrs. Meir. “She was a courageous leader, a skilled diplomat, a strong statesman, a true friend of freedom, and a kind compassionate human being. Now the most fitting monument to her remarkable life would be continued progress towards the peace she sought—a peace that provides for the security and independence of Israel and makes possible continued progress for all the peoples of the Middle East”. Henry Kissinger said she was “an idealist without illusions...who had a consuming passion for peace”. He admitted that he loved Golda Meir. Virtually every American senator issued a statement extolling Golda, using superlative terms according to the talents of their ghostwriters. Among the best was a man of great linguistic ability, Senator Daniel P. Moynihan: “Her death saddens us all. She was the most formidable female political leader of this century—vigorous, tenacious, heroic. We are all profoundly diminished by her loss”. Governors, mayors, labor leaders added their voices. The leaders of the many American Jewish organizations, men and women who loved and feared her as a close relation, also poured their hearts out. After all, she did not only preach as they did, but dared to do what she called for. She built and led a nation, while they were the vicarious onlookers, giving huge sums of money and lots of advice, but on rare occasion their own or the lives of their children.

In Oslo, Begin received the news and was gracious enough to begin his acceptance speech of the Nobel Peace Prize by paying a tribute to Mrs. Meir: “I ask for permission first to pay tribute to Golda Meir, my predecessor, a great leader and prime minister, who strove with all her heart to achieve peace between Israel and her neighbors. Her blessed memory will live forever in the hearts of the Jewish people and of all peace-loving nations.”

Peres, Rabin and other Labor Party leaders issued statements, each expressing in various words the same feeling of awe, respect, love and admiration they had for this woman. In Britain, former Prime Minister Harold Wilson recalled how in 1974 when he was in office, he kissed Golda during a function held in London. The next day, photos appeared in the British media and resulted in mass protests by Arab ambassadors. “What shall we tell them”, asked British Foreign Office diplomats worriedly. “Tell them I kiss whoever I want. It’s a matter of sex”. Wilson noted that she was the toughest leader he had ever met, stating her case in black and white. Beijing Radio briefly mentioned her death. It took Moscow Radio a few days to announce it. Editorials world-wide praised the dead leader and special television programs showed her at her best and during the most difficult times.

A day after she died, the family gathered in her home to read her will. Also present were Peres, Galili and party official Ya’acov Einy in whose hands she had deposited the will she wrote in October 1967. He produced the simple document which he had kept in a safe at the Labor Party headquarters in Tel Aviv.

I am writing these words on the eve of New Year 5727, October 3, 1967. A few years ago, before entering an operation, which doctors viewed as serious, I wrote to members of my family that I forbid eulogies and naming anything after me. Since I am not certain these words have reached my family after the operation which was anyhow successful, I now wish to reiterate them with more stress to the Party. I am convinced that my wishes will be honored.

She made no indication where she wanted to be buried. The party decided to let the government determine her final resting place. Golda's death presented the Likud Government with a sensitive dilemma. Scores of world leaders were expected to attend and this would create a major security problem. But beyond that, the funeral could evoke strong emotions that could overshadow Begin's Nobel Prize. Golda's funeral could become a huge pro-Labor demonstration, feared some officials. Finally, the Begin government rose over such petty considerations and decided that the coffin would lie in state in the Knesset plaza in Jerusalem and not at the Histadrut headquarters in Tel Aviv as the family desired. There, the public would pay its respects and she would then be buried in a section known as the Nation's Great Leaders on Mount Herzl, next to Levi Eshkol and Eliezer Kaplan. Years later two other Israeli leaders would be buried in the same row- Yitzhak Rabin (1995) and Shimon Peres (2016).

The funeral was set for December 12 to enable the many overseas delegations to attend. From the United States, Air Force One brought the American delegation that was headed by President Carter's mother Miz Lillian and included many luminaries, among them Henry Kissinger, Arthur Goldberg, Senators Moynihan, Ribicoff, Javitz, and Humphrey's widow Muriel. Secretary of State Vance came from Cairo after holding talks with Sadat. On hand were the Chairman of the United Jewish Appeal Irwin Field, her loyal friend Sam Rothberg, Marie Syrkin, Simcha Dinitz, Isaac Stern and many others. Harold Wilson came from England. German Justice Minister Vogel led a large delegation that came on a special flight, which included the secretary of the German Social-Democratic Party Koschnik. Willy Brandt was recovering from a heart attack and stayed home.

Golda's coffin was taken to the Knesset Plaza on early Monday morning, borne by the Labor Party leaders headed by Peres and Allon. There began an endless flow of ordinary people who silently and solemnly filed past in the cold and rain. Men, women and children, young and old, entire school classes came, soldiers and veterans and simple people from all walks of life, from the cities, the kibbutzim and moshavim. More than a quarter of a million Israelis came to pay their respects. A few wept, some stopped to watch the coffin intently. Among them was a woman who stood with clenched fists and shouted: "Golda, give my regards to Eddy, who died in that war". Many walked the long distance from the railway station to the Knesset. It was as though the nation's mother had died and this

was a family gathering. “She was like our mother”, was the refrain that echoed throughout the day in the Knesset Plaza. Some people came twice. Parents lifted babies to take a last look. The mourners filed by in silence, they were hushed, in awe. An elderly woman from a poor Jerusalem neighborhood said: “Golda, bring Messiah quick, we have so many enemies”. A child asked his father: “Who will be Golda now?”

The next day, her coffin was taken to the Chagall Hall inside the Knesset. It was placed in that very hall where she had spoken so often, of which she was so proud, whose art and artist she loved. The ceremony was held indoors as the rain continued to fall. The coffin, flanked by an IDF honor guard, draped in the blue and white national flag, stood on a stand. The mourners crowded the hall. No one sat. Hundreds of people, from the mighty to the lowly, waited for the ceremony to begin. There were no eulogies. She hated eulogies and feared of what people might say in her praise. A leading actress recited from Golda’s own words. Menachem recited the Kaddish. Someone played the cello. The guard of honor then lifted the coffin and took it away from the Knesset, the institution in which she had served from 1949 to 1974. A simple IDF Weapons Carrier carried the coffin the short distance to Mount Herzl. The mourners followed in busses. 50 women soldiers walked ahead of the coffin bearing 25 floral wreaths. A guard of honor saluted. The Chief Military Cantor recited the prayers—Zidduk Hadin, Kadish Gadol and El Male Rachamim. She was lowered to her grave. The wreaths were placed on it. The ceremony over, the mourners began to file past her grave. Navon, Begin and Galili placed stone pebbles on her grave. Arthur Goldberg and Sam Rothberg halted to recite the Kaddish. There were few tears. There was a vast sense of loss. The rain never ended. An hour later, everyone had gone. The sun broke through the clouds. Golda was alone. She had come to her final rest.

# Epilogue

Almost four decades after Golda Meir's death, it seems that most Israelis have forgotten her. Her name and fame continued to reverberate overseas, mainly in the United States. But after her death, in Israel her image remained negative. For a long time, there was almost unanimity among Israelis that of the first four prime ministers of Israel, she was the worst. Few praised her achievements and many were critical. One such evaluation was that of historian David Shaham:

She was a decisive and unwavering person. She divided the world to the just and the unjust. She had a deep and burning belief that her side, the nation, the party, was always the just side. This belief she succeeded to convey with total inner conviction. It was said that her language was limited and her vocabulary poor. But this never prevented her from being a highly effective speaker. She always exuded an unmitigated assurance around her, in every word she uttered. She had an excellent debating skill and could utilize her opponents' vulnerable spots. Analysis of her texts shows many logical weaknesses, but the way she spoke and the tone of her speech were also among the components of awe that she spread in her environment. Few dared to dispute her words after she had expressed her decreed opinion. She held the reins of the government and party with a strong and steady hand.<sup>1</sup>

This assessment fails to explain why so many millions around the world mourned her death. The Israeli historian Anita Shapira wrote that she had captured the

imagination of those who mourned her with unparalleled power, as a leader, a woman. Her mistakes and mishaps that lowered her image among the Israeli intellectuals and among the public at large, have never hurt her super-status as an admired personality. Even after the Yom Kippur War, she awakened the spontaneous support of many groups. After she retired from the premiership, she became a highly important, well-liked national and international figure. Somehow, her charisma continued to attract hearts with no connection to her position. There was something in her figure, lumpy, heavy, something of the strength of a rock, that succeeds to withstand the erosion of the tempests of the time, inspiring trust and confidence, because of being so stable, so unchanging, so predictable.<sup>2</sup>

In the first years after her death, her name continued to echo around the world, mainly in the United States, where her personality continued to be the source of much interest as seen in thousands of articles, several books and even a television series starring Ingrid Bergman. The interest waned somewhat until the play "Golda's Kitchen" reawakened interest in her. Several books were written about

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<sup>1</sup> Shaham, Israel, p. 332.

<sup>2</sup> Anita Shapira, "Women and Feminism", in *Jews, Zionists and What's in Between Them*, Tel Aviv, 2007.



her in the early years of the present millennium, two of them in French. In Israel, too, more historians were attracted to study this figure and this led to two full-scale biographies. The publication of the protocols dealing with the Yom Kippur War and her testimonies before the Agranat Commission, produced a far more balanced picture. Transcripts of her meetings with Nixon and Kissinger, and the many descriptions praising her leadership during the Yom Kippur War, helped restore her image. A number of highly uncomplimentary books about Moshe Dayan and scores of autobiographies of the participants in that cataclysmic event, also led many to reconsider their previous evaluation of Golda.

Another reason for the renewed interest in her was the many turbulent developments in Israel. The first war in Lebanon that led Begin to resign and sink into depression, the outbreak of the First Intifada, the first Gulf War, the Oslo Process, the signing of the Israel-Jordan peace treaty, the failure of Oslo after the assassination of Rabin, the Second Intifada, the Second War in Lebanon, three operations in Gaza, the lackluster performance of some of her successors, all this led many in Israel to seek a strong and decisive leadership that Golda had provided. Having been followed by prime ministers like Benjamin Netanyahu, Ehud Barak, Arik Sharon and Ehud Olmert, no wonder that her image far overshadows theirs and now she is depicted as the symbol of adherence to values, principles and goals, her personal integrity, her insistence on peace as she understood it and her ability to resist international pressure. Many of her harsh critics who accused her of stubbornness, rigidity, ignoring major changes that had taken place in Israel and in the Middle East, now realize that they have erred in some of their assessments, mostly when it came to the charge that she missed an opportunity for peace with Egypt between 1970 and 1973 that led directly and inevitably to the Yom Kippur War.

There has been a revival of interest in her, also because of the three Palestinian uprisings, in view of the adamant hostile and uncompromising actions and policies of Hamas, the Islamic Jihad, Hezbollah and Iran's determination that Israel must be eliminated. The concept of "it is us or them", so clearly pronounced by Golda Meir, for which she was derided and sneered at, has come back to haunt the national psyche. More Israelis now feel that she may have had a point when she claimed that she could not foresee peace between Israel and its neighbors in the near future. What is the new image that now emerges?

Golda belonged to that small and elite group of leaders who left their imprint, for better or worse, by commission and omission, on the development of Zionism, Israel, Israeli politics, Israeli society and the Labor Movement. She was the product of the shtetl and remained an authentic representative of Eastern European Jewry for all her life. She was the personification of the Diaspora and was intuitively identified with the Diaspora's Jewish masses. And indeed, there

could be no better spokesperson for the Jewish People. Her nationalism emerged as a reaction and response to the state of the Jews in Eastern Europe, persecuted and threatened, forever on the defensive against the hostile and brutal outside world. Indeed, since her childhood, she did come into contact with this alien world and to her dying day she could never rid herself of the complex of suspecting the gentiles. Yet, she was able to forge special relationships with many of the world's leaders, and eventually turned out to be the most impressive representative of Israel and the Jewish People, winning international acclaim in the process.

Golda learned her Zionism and what little she knew of the Jewish tradition and heritage from her elder sister, and not from her parents. Similar to other Second Aliyah leaders, she was raised on the theories of Borochof and Syrkin that fused Zionism with socialism, and was imbued with the belief that human society in general, and the Jewish People in particular, could attain great heights on their path to changing their condition and transforming their status among the nations.

The central elements of Golda Meir's personality were unflagging and unqualified loyalty to the Zionist ideal, to socialism and to the Labor Movement. Apart from politics, she barely had other areas of interest. She truly believed that lofty ideals could move people to action, and that eventually the Zionist ideal would triumph. From her early years until the fifth decade of her life, she had the talent and ability to acquire new ideas with relative ease and speed, to adopt and popularize them as though her own. She was capable of reacting swiftly to new circumstances, and was, on the whole, flexible. But towards the latter part of her life, at the peak of her popularity and renown, there appeared signs of mental stagnation and inflexibility. This occurred at the time when vitality and originality were so sorely needed. It happened while she was Israel's prime minister and had to deal with highly complex and difficult issues. At the end of her stewardship, she had to grapple with the key issue of Israel's very existence. Golda was far removed from intellectual depth, but being a highly pragmatic person, she was capable of analyzing social and political processes, setting goals and determining priorities and even creating new organizational structures to achieve her goals.

She was a woman endowed with enormous patience. She did not possess, as did Ben-Gurion and Weizmann, traits of nervousness, or impulsiveness, nor did she display fits of anger. She had no inferiority complex regarding her origins and therefore was treated with much respect by Jews and non-Jews alike. With the latter, she spoke on the basis of equality. Non-Jewish leaders saw her as a genuine representative of the Jewish People, of the Yishuv and later of the State of Israel. She was proud of her Jewishness and had no complexes about the Jewish tradition even though she was not observant and had little Jewish education.

She never formed her own faction or bloc in the party or Movement which could be seen as her power base. She exuded an aura of enormous political power, but this created an illusion that Golda was omnipotent and could be counted upon to act correctly under any situation. The feeling only intensified the confusion when it became evident that Golda and her associates gravely misread the military-political map on the eve of the Yom Kippur War. It was then that the legend burst and her prestige plummeted at home.<sup>3</sup>

She was a highly unique leader. At the beginning of her career, she rebelled against the conventions of her time and attempted to grapple with a new and unknown reality, when she fled her home and joined her sister. Later, this became evident when she decided to immigrate to Palestine. There, she and her friends who implemented the Zionist revolution in its best years, created in fact a new social and political reality, when they established the institutional infrastructure of the “State on its Way”. She and her close associates were highly successful in translating their dream into a vital organizational and institutional system, without which Israel would not have come into being and survived its early years. But rebellion ended for Golda in the 1950’s, which coincided with her own age. From then on, until the end of her life, her revolutionary zeal waned and she focused on preserving the machinery, ideals, and the achievements of the past.<sup>4</sup>

What was the secret of her charisma? Like any charismatic figure, she was a domineering woman, at times intolerant and occasionally fanatic when it came to her views and positions. Her charisma also derived from the feeling of her comrades, that after Ben-Gurion’s departure from the political arena in 1963, she alone remained of the generation of the giants and they saw in her also the good Jewish mother, always concerned about the fate of her children-people. But often she seemed unable to rise above current events, to think in an orderly fashion on the future of the country and devise a proper strategy to insure its existence. Golda never saw herself as the generation’s teacher and was inherently unfit to play such a role. The gap between her and Israel’s younger generation in the 1960’s and 1970’s was unbridgeable. She did not occupy her time wondering over issues of values and morality. She did not pose a new direction to the question of what were the values of the Labor Movement in a rapidly changing reality. How should its leaders comport themselves and how could they set a behavior pattern for others to emulate? No wonder that ideology per se never interested her and she did not contribute in any meaningful way to the ideology of the Labor Movement. She sermonized endlessly about such issues as progress, equality, unity

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3 Steinberg, *Women in Power*.

4 Interview with Golda Meir in 1974, in the Golda Meir Association.

and consensus, justice and self-realization. But even then there was an absence of variety and sophistication, partly because of her limited command of Hebrew (and English). She never bothered to prepare her speeches carefully and chose instead to chat rather than orate. Her speeches often sounded hollow and when read today it is clear that little remains which is relevant to Jewish history.

While demanding perfection of herself and of her associates in performing her duties, she did not have the capacity to observe developments from the margins. Being a woman of action, she did not brood long over issues and therefore had to settle for a series of compromises. She disliked routine and above all lack of creativity. For her, the seven good years of her life were those spent in the Ministry of Labor and Housing. Apart from laying the foundations for Israel's presence in Africa, she was never taken with the routine and often dull diplomatic work in the Foreign Ministry and abhorred its outer manifestations of ceremonies and rites.

From the early 1960's, there occurred in her an inner change. From now on, until she resigned her office as prime minister in 1974, she was noted for the stratification of her thinking. Her leadership was no longer constructive and creative. She was content to play the role of mediator and arbitrator in an attempt to satisfy all the needs and demands that operated in the Israeli political and coalition systems. In a situation where human and financial resources are very limited, this role is not only ungrateful but virtually impossible. Instead of trying to change Israel's governance system, revising the electoral system, altering the relations between the secular and the orthodox, trying to ameliorate the growing gap between the better-off Ashkenazi Jews and the poorer Sephardi Jews, she preferred to preserve the existing order which was to her a symbol of stability and the only one she knew. She preferred to act through the party institutions which she knew so well: the Secretariat, the Knesset faction, the Bureau, the Central Committee, "our friends", "our ministers". She truly believed that she and her party were serving the principles of the Labor Movement and Zionism. Regrettably, she barely had any influence on the development of parliamentary life in Israel. Apart from key social and labor laws, her name is not connected with any significant legislation.

The central problem that faced Mapai and the Labor Movement from the 1950's was how to retain constant ideological tension, ferment, and commitment to social change. The true test of any ideological, monolithic and militant political party lies in its success to bring about social change. Mapai succeeded in implementing its social ideology during the Mandate era and in the early years of Israel's independence. It provided employment, education, health services, housing, welfare and even some culture. Mapai was highly successful in ordering its priorities: security, immigration, absorption, strengthening Israel's international position and its economic growth. But in the process it failed to bring

about a change in public views, because along the way there developed discrimination, narrow interests and conservatism. Mapai sought to fight this phenomenon through political mechanisms aimed at preventing opportunism among the Israeli people and the crossing of party lines of some leaders due to career considerations. For many years, Mapai succeeded in maintaining party discipline and keeping the leaders and the rank and file under control. But in the effort to create a new Israeli nation—Mapai failed.

The Italian leader Giuseppe Mazzini once said: “Now that we have created Italy, we have to create the Italians”. The Labor Movement created Israel but failed to mould the Israeli nation according to their ideals. The leaders realized this failure but preferred to blame the people rather than themselves. The Likud eventually turned out to be far more populist than Labor. In 1977, some of the Labor leaders thought that the election results that brought Likud to power were a mistake on the part of the electorate, sort of an accident. When the voters eventually realized their erroneous ways, they would vote Labor again. From 1977 until 2017, Labor would govern the country twice, from 1992 to 1996, with Yitzhak Rabin at the helm, and from 1999 to 2001, under Ehud Barak as prime minister. Israelis continued to cast more votes for the nationalist right-wing Likud and its Orthodox and Ultra Orthodox allies than to centrist or leftist parties. The rise and fall of Golda Meir is in more ways than one the story of the rise and fall of the Israel Labor Movement.

As a highly disciplined woman, Golda proved that positions and duty precede family, friends, sentiments and even love. In order to fulfill the many roles entrusted to or desired by her, she in fact mortgaged her marriage and other romantic attachments. The irony was that until she became foreign minister, she continued to grow in stature. The moment she assumed the two most senior positions in the land, those of foreign and prime minister, it seemed as though she ceased to realize her potential and to develop. She never chose a successor, even though she was aware of the need to prepare future leaders for the country and party.

She was a classical product of a political party, a Socialist movement and the Histadrut. But she preferred to promote men, and almost no women, who did not originate from these bodies. Like Ben-Gurion she opted more for senior IDF officers: Yigal Allon, Yitzhak Rabin, Chaim Bar-Lev and Aharon Yariv, to name a few. Perhaps, subconsciously, they were promoted because they were never a threat to her leadership and standing, they would not criticize her in public. Popular labor leaders such as Yitzhak Ben-Aharon, were removed from center stage. The others simply chose to remain silent fearing the prime-ministerial “glance”, as Eban aptly described it. She was not known for advancing women to positions of responsibility.

Throughout her life, Golda was a superb tactician but a poor strategist. In the early 1930's, her enormous potential became apparent. From a somewhat hesitant and unsure woman, she emerged as a superb organizer and a sophisticated tactician, determined and often daring, with a growing sense of self-assurance. But as these positive traits became more evident, they were accompanied by a sense of inadequacy and the constant urge to prove that she was "somebody". Perhaps she chose politics because of a lack of self-assurance. But she succeeded in overcoming the many doubts and hesitations which were so typical of her in the 1920's and to develop a sense of inner strength, which at times was even exaggerated. At least, this was the impressions that she exuded. In the final analysis, she had a highly positive motivation of self-realization and achievement that drove her to become "somebody", to achieve her inner needs, to gain approval, esteem, honors, love and admiration. All these came with economic security, always important to her.

Golda was a woman with a strong urge to advance her career, but she was flexible and held her aspirations under a tight rein. She was not calculating regarding every move she made. She was less interested in the material gains that accompanied each role or function, such as salary, status, rank, grade, fringe benefits and even power. She never sought to accumulate political power for the sake of power. She was mainly interested in what she could accomplish in the framework of each role, but also how it would further advance her career.

From her American experience, she developed the belief that institutional mechanisms would bring redemption and solve many problems. Therefore, she devoted many years to derive the maximum benefits from those institutions in which she functioned. Since she was blessed with acute and healthy political instincts, she correctly identified the hopes placed in Mapai and the Histadrut in the 1930's, 1940's and early 1950's. They were mainly in the spheres of education, health, employment and social security. Hence she dealt with the unemployed, created funds to stimulate employment and acted within the Histadrut's social services network. Towards the end of her career as prime minister, she never promised her people a bed of roses, created few expectations and did not stir great hopes. Her leadership then seemed to have lost a sense of inspiration. She had no choice but to follow the public expectations and promise the people peace, security, economic well-being and equality in bearing the burden and sharing national duties. As the Israelis became more educated and sophisticated, they demanded the fulfillment of the promises. When it became apparent that Israel's economy could not allow the implementation of the promises, there developed a sense of bitterness, frustration and disappointment that seeped into many sectors. The move to that party that promised more, without worrying too much who would foot the bill—the Likud—was rapid and exploded in the May

1977 elections. The Likud garnered more power and appeal as it became evident that chances of reaching some co-existence with the Palestinians were virtually impossible.

Golda Meir probably did not understand Mao Zedong's dictum of the need for a party to maintain close links not only with the masses but between the party's institutions and the rank and file. The Israel Labor Party became a cumbersome and bloated bureaucratic apparatus that ceased to be a warm home to its members. It continued to be a warm nest for Golda, who may not have discerned, or refused to admit, its rapid decline. The new Israeli proletariat, whose majority was now Sephardi Jews, no longer saw Labor as a party ready to help their plight. The prevailing system was perceived by them as helping the ruling elite, the new plutocracy and the old oligarchy. They became apathetic, and later they transferred their loyalty to the Likud that openly preyed on their bitterness and growing sense of deprivation.

Golda's attitude to the Arabs was based, too, on wrong sentiments. She was afraid of Arabs, and these fears were connected in her mind with memories of pogroms, riots, and the Holocaust. She may also have been afraid of the Arab sentiments of vengeance and grievances of which she often spoke. She could not bear to admit that perhaps the Palestinian Arabs felt that they were grievously wronged and dispossessed. She also rejected out of hand the remote possibility that some of their demands might be just. She refused to accept the sense of Arab humiliation. She refused to accept the idea that the Palestinian Arabs were people without a country. For years, she ignored the notion that there is a Palestinian identity and entity, and changed her views only after strenuous efforts to convince her otherwise. She preferred to speak at length, like Begin, and unlike Ben-Gurion, of the great trauma inflicted on the Jewish people. Once stress is laid on the horror in Jewish history, there is resistance to change in attitude. She found it hard to confront the key issue that faced Zionism from its inception: the Arab question. Her position was simple: We or they. To her, Israel was constantly at war and therefore anyone who dared challenge or question this premise was undermining Israel's security. She railed against those who sought to shatter myths and accused them of undermining morale in times of war. Righteousness became her symbol. This also explains her impatience with the Israeli academic community and many of the country's writers and intellectuals with whom she never found common language, and rarely made any attempt to seek one.<sup>5</sup>

What remains of her half a century of toil? First and foremost, a glorious system of labor legislation in the spheres of social security, vocational training, protection

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5 Yedioth Achronot, 6 November 1987.

of working women and children, days of rest and other workers' benefits. All these progressive laws were designed to realize the Zionist-Socialist principles of equality, justice and nation building. These achievements will long be remembered and linked with Golda's name, although the objects of these laws, immigrants from countries of distress and native-born Israelis on the lowest economic scales, turned their back on Mapai that brought them to Israel, absorbed them and whose representative initiated this legislation. A second personal achievement is the immigration of Soviet Jews. She never wearied of this long and arduous struggle, at times dangerous and hopeless against a harsh dictatorship. Towards the end of her life, she lived to see the beginning of the opening of the gates, but did not live to witness their final downfall after 1989, and the arrival of over a million Jews from the former Soviet Union in Israel, forever changing the face of the country. The privilege of lighting the beacon for Russian Jews will never be taken away from her. A third achievement was the laying of the foundations for Israel's ties and presence in many Third World countries, mainly on the African continent. Even their setback during the 1973 war cannot eclipse her role in nurturing them. She also had many personal achievements in promoting Israeli-American relations in such fields as arms purchase, nuclear understanding and economic aid, not to mention her tremendous power over American Jews. This huge community reciprocated and showered on her sentiments of love, admiration and adulation. But most of them failed to heed her example and follow her to Israel.

One of her main achievements was the leadership she displayed during the Yom Kippur War. At the time when a number of key men in charge of Israel's defense were wondering about the very existence of the State of Israel, she assumed command and guided the political-military-strategic decisions in an assured hand that inspired confidence in those who conducted the war. To this very day, few Israelis are aware of the central role Golda Meir played in the course of that harrowing war and how her steady nerves and good common sense helped save the day. She never despaired, never criticized during the war and supplied the government of Israel with strong leadership. Regrettably, her failure to appear in public denied the Israeli people the realization that in spite of the early failures, Israel had rallied and the IDF achieved some major victories.

But there were many searing failures, the key among them the lack of preparedness for the October 1973 War and the terrible price that it exacted from the Israeli people. Notwithstanding her own leadership role during the war, she knew deep in her heart the consequences of that event were highly negative for Israel. It undermined Israel's international position and exposed many weaknesses. Golda was the first to admit that she and her government failed to prepare the nation for the eventuality of such a brutal war. All this led to the collapse of the self-assurance of many Israelis and sowed seeds of doubts among world



Jewry and friends of Israel that its leaders knew what they were doing. A personal setback for Golda and a very bitter pill to swallow was the desertion of most of the African nations who suspended diplomatic ties with Israel in the midst of the war, caving in to Arab threats and blackmail. Friends are tested in times of need. The African governments failed to meet this test. A similar setback occurred when Golda and her associates in the Labor Movement failed to stem the chilly and deteriorating attitude of the European Socialist parties and governments in October 1973. They were in no rush to help the besieged and beleaguered Israel and some even interfered with the American effort to do so.

Her own party disintegrated during her lifetime. It lost its hegemony, deservedly, in May 1977. Golda could not stem the slow process of the party's decline, although she did preside over the unification of the three major Labor parties in early 1968. By then, it was too late. During her brief tenure as the party's secretary general, she could not stop the accelerating process of the party's rot, disintegration and its evident loss of direction due to a sick leader and two heirs-apparent waiting in the wings. She failed to give voice to the people's aspirations and hopes after the Six Days War. She, who began her way as a rebel, became the preserver of the values and heritage of the past. But these were no longer applicable to the needs of modern industrial Israel.

At the conclusion of the Yom Kippur War, her healthy instincts told her that she had to go. She realized it was impossible to gloss over this event as though nothing had happened. But in those very days, she was physically and emotionally drained and could not bear the thought of radical changes that must be made because of the war and its consequences for Israel. The war tested her personal courage and leadership qualities. But that was not enough. Although Israel achieved an impressive military victory, it was unable to translate these achievements into political gains. One of her glaring deficiencies as prime minister was her inability to read correctly rapidly changing situations which required quick improvisations and new ideas and policies to fit the new reality. She understood better global processes than the changes that took place in the Arab world after the 1967 war and mainly after the October 1973 war. It was hard for her to see that history flows in its own channels. As the quintessential Jewish mother, forever worried over her children, tempered by pogroms and persecution, she chose to stand on guard and to prevent any expression that could be interpreted as lack of moral justification in the righteousness of her cause. She was not among the doubters and procrastinators. While she won a legion of admirers overseas because of this trait, at home there were growing doubts over her leadership style and her capacity to read and interpret and act quickly in the face of new military, political and economic maps. What was seen as fidelity to principles and adherence to lofty goals abroad was seen as stubbornness and obstinacy in Israel.

Among the leaders of the Yishuv and of Israel, few were fortunate to be included in the category of figures that changed history. Chaim Weizmann, Berl Katznelson and mainly Ben-Gurion were among them. Golda Meir cannot be perceived as a historic figure that changed the annals of her nation. But there is little doubt that she was one of the main builders of the Yishuv and the State of Israel, a loyal assistant to Ben-Gurion. But when she reached the pinnacle of her career, she was unable to develop an independent leadership style. She left her mark on the history of Israel and the Middle East between 1969 and 1974 by virtue of being the prime minister of Israel.

The answer to the question whether she contributed positively to historical developments in the region during those years is not highly flattering. Yet, she was the last authoritative leader of the Labor Movement. Her successors failed to find the answers to the significant changes facing Israeli society. Instead of grappling with them, at least one successor, Shimon Peres, sought shelter in the broad arms of a Government of National Unity with the Likud. The veteran Labor Party leaders were replaced by unimpressive figures, with the exception of Yitzhak Rabin.

A popular saying divides human beings into three categories: those who make things happen, those who watch things happen, and those who later wonder what happened. Golda began her career as a central collaborator in the making of key events in the history of the renaissance of the Jewish people. She never watched things from the sidelines. Finally, she kept asking herself during the five years of torment that remained to her after 1973—what went wrong? With the passing of time, Israelis too, wonder what happened to that special personality—Golda Meir, whose fate was to lead them in five turbulent years.

In her will she forbade naming things after her. But even while still alive, she permitted the establishment of the “Golda Meir Fund for Social Advancement of Youth from Border Regions”. Today, throughout Israel there are streets, squares, suburbs named after her. In the heart of Tel Aviv there stands the Golda Meir Performing Center housing the Israel National Opera and theaters. Her name appeared on the doors of at least one fashionable restaurant. The paucity of great leaders in the Labor Movement brought many Israelis to cling to her memory. Many visit her grave on the official day of the commemoration of her memory.

And once a year, as the dwindling number of her admirers gather on the slopes of Mount Herzl, facing her grave which overlooks the Judean mountains, they keep wondering about the special character and image of this proud Jewess, this motherly but tough, stern and gracious, lioness among lions, loving and scathing, soft but severe woman, full of empathy, yet she could lash out mercilessly at her critics. The commander in chief during Israel’s bloodiest war, a peace lover by nature, a Labor Movement leader and in fact the leader of the

entire Jewish People. Her vision was, according to her own words: “a Jewish state in which masses of Jews from all the corners of the world continue to settle and build; Israel linked in a cooperative effort with its neighbors for the sake of all the nations in the region; Israel that will continue to be a flourishing democracy, based on the solid foundations of justice and social equality.”

But when she was prime minister, she was beset with terrible dreams. A close friend, Ya'acov Hazan, once asked her if she was beset by dreams at night. She replied: “And how. But there is one terrible dream. Suddenly all the telephones in the house start ringing. I know what the ringing heralds and I am afraid to lift the many receivers. I wake up soaked in cold sweat. It's quiet in the house. I heave a sigh of relief, but cannot fall asleep again. I know that if I fall asleep, the dream will come back. I lie and think only of this: when will this dream leave me and those who will succeed me? Then we can go back to dream all our beautiful life dreams.” The beautiful dream and the harsh reality—this was the essence of the life of Golda Meir.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Quoted in Tamir, ed., *Golda*, p. 17.

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