

'A Knack for Handling Power'

□ Avishai Margalit

**Ben-Gurion:
Father of Modern Israel**

by Anita Shapira.

Yale University Press, 273 pp., \$25.00

Clarissa Eden, the widow of Anthony Eden and Winston Churchill's niece, once asked my late wife, Edna, and me if we had an idea for someone capable of writing her husband's biography. "What kind of biography do you have in mind?" Edna asked. "I want a big fat book that includes everything," she said. "I don't mind if it makes for boring reading, but I want everything in it, so that future historians could use this book as a reliable source book and make their own judgment about my husband's achievements and failures." The idea was clear: it is for our generation to report accurately and for future generations to judge soundly.

Anita Shapira is the author of a long, rich, and engaging biography of the Labor Zionist leader Berl Katznelson, who died in Jerusalem in 1944 and was arguably the only true friend David Ben-Gurion ever had in his life. Now she writes about Ben-Gurion himself—a short biography of the kind that Clarissa Eden might have thought should be left for future generations.

Ben-Gurion retains his old admirers. But since his death in 1973 he has earned an increasing amount of grudging respect from old enemies. Moreover, his stature gains greatly from a comparison with the hollow men who rule Israel today. Shapira is an admirer with no grudge. She may be critical of some aspects of Ben-Gurion's personality, but she is hardly critical of any that count. For her, Ben-Gurion had an amazingly robust sense of reality. He was able to judge clearly where events were heading and to confront them head-on with courage and determination. He emerged in a historical hour when quite different courses of action could have been chosen, and not only was he the founder of the State of Israel but he shaped, like no one else, the history of the Jews in modern times. Shapira quotes approvingly Katznelson's description of Ben-Gurion as "history's gift to the Jewish people."

What made Ben-Gurion so respected among Jews and turned him from merely a powerful leader into a leader set apart from ordinary men by exceptional power and inspired vision was one big decision: to found the State of Israel, on May 14, 1948 (a day before the end of the British Mandate in Palestine). Would subsequent events have been different had Ben-Gurion not decided to declare the founding of Israel? Since the war with the Palestinian Arabs was by then in full swing, it is not clear that a decision not to found the Jewish state would have prevented the Arab states from joining the war. Events would then have proceeded much the same way as they did.

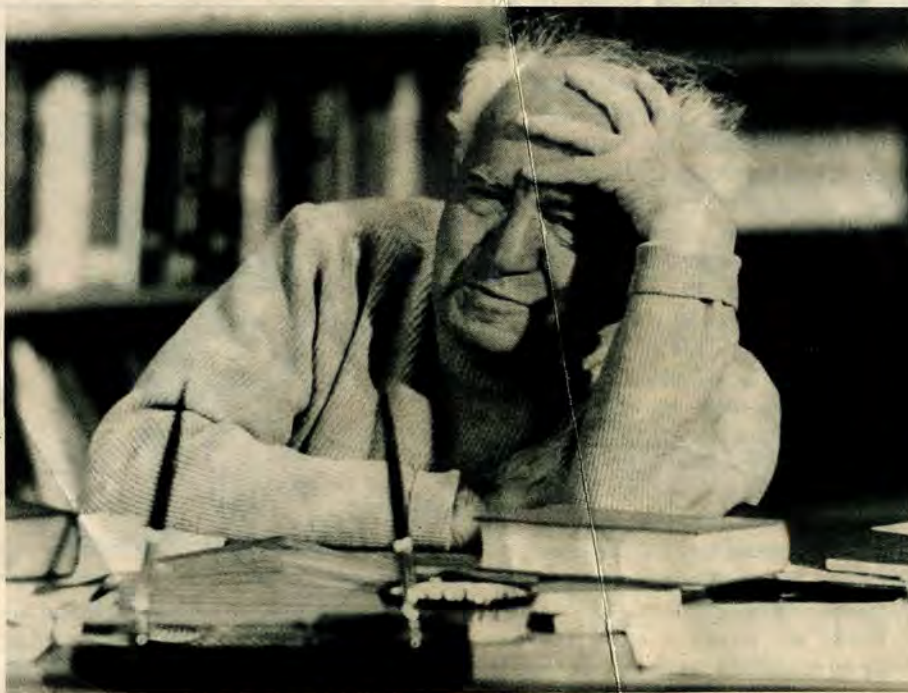
But let us assume that it was a decision that changed the historical course of events. Then the question becomes: Was it a great decision, at least from the Jews' perspective?

Winning the 1948 war and creating a workable state for the Jews seem, on the face of it, reasons to believe that Ben-Gurion's decision was brilliant. You don't argue with success. Yet we should argue with success, it is often said. If I gamble my life on a flip of a coin—heads, I am to be executed; tails, I become a tycoon—one may question my sanity even if the coin does come up tails.

Comparing the flip of a coin to Ben-Gurion's decision is not as outlandish as it may seem. As his military commanders assessed it at the time,

of the Arab population (mainly Christians) in Nazareth and the villages surrounding it. If we take account of this history, it seems clear that losing the war would have been fatal to the Jews in Palestine.

There was another decision by Ben-Gurion, however, that was of huge importance. In 1946, he came to the conclusion that a war with the Arabs was imminent and that the Yishuv should prepare for it by training and equipping an army. Moreover, he believed that the Yishuv should not be distracted by what he considered an



David Ben-Gurion, 1971

Ben-Gurion in effect took a fifty-fifty gamble on the life of the Yishuv—the pre-state Jewish community in Palestine—only three years after the annihilation of European Jewry. (I don't know of any evidence that Ben-Gurion himself had a more optimistic assessment of the chances for the new state's survival.) Yet he got his way among the principal Zionist leaders of the Yishuv cabinet by the narrowest of margins: five supported him, four were against him—and Israel was created.

Had the gamble failed and the Yishuv lost the war, what would have happened? There is every reason to believe that this would have been, at the very least, the end of the Jewish community as a collective entity in Palestine. Evidence for that can be seen from the fact that a total ethnic cleansing of Jews was underway in four of the areas conquered by the Arabs—the Old City of Jerusalem, Gush Etzion, Atarot, and Neve Yakov. In those places practically all Jewish civilians were expelled by Arabs.

At the same time, there are still heated discussions about the ethnic cleansing of Arabs by Jews in 1948—an operation much larger in scope—how systematic it was and Ben-Gurion's part in it. Yitzhak Rabin recalled that when he asked Ben-Gurion what to do with the Arabs of Lyda and Ramle, towns captured in central Israel, Ben-Gurion waved his hand to indicate: get rid of them. Yet perhaps fearing world condemnation, Ben-Gurion was also the one who prevented the expulsion

almost irrelevant struggle with the departing British forces. This was Ben-Gurion's realism at its best.

Shapira's clear and concise book will be useful for those who want to know the basic facts about Ben-Gurion's career. She wants to counter his image as a monolith with no cracks, a monument of square-jawed determination and tight-lipped will, and to give a sense of his psychological complexity. He was not what he appeared to be: he was, she argues, more sensitive, more considerate, and he was riddled with doubt.

Another way of making Ben-Gurion more human is to describe him in love, and write of the women in his life. Indeed there were several such women, even though he was married to one, Paula, who was unfairly seen by the Israeli public as a kind of Xanthippe. Paula was in reality a good-hearted woman and an exceedingly devoted wife to her frequently absentee husband. She had to raise their three children while he often communicated with them by means of long letters that sounded more like political communiqués.

Shapira mentions the proverbial "kutch-mutch" meal that Paula used to prepare for him, "a healthful but tasteless concoction she insisted he eat twice a day." She was also blunt, which meant that one could hear more truth from her about her husband than from many of his mythmaking admirers. Isaiah Berlin once told me about a visit he

made to the Ben-Gurion home. Paula opened the door and told him, "Thank God you arrived early, now I can go rescue Ben-Gurion"—she used to call him by his last name—"from his Bible circle. You know," she added, "he is bored stiff over there."

Shapira credits Paula with "a discerning eye." She "could read people instantly, an ability Ben-Gurion lacked." Paula was probably better at reading people than her husband, but that says more about him than her. Ben-Gurion was psychologically obtuse in his one-on-one relations—a perception shared by enemies and admirers alike. This raises a puzzle. How can someone so blind to human nuances at the same time be so effective politically?

An answer was suggested by Yitzhak Ben-Aharon, who, in the early 1950s, belonged to Mapam, the Marxist party that was a rival to Ben-Gurion's Mapai party. In 1952, after six months of negotiations, Israel and Germany reached a reparation agreement that stated that Germany would pay around a billion dollars as restitution to the survivors of the Holocaust. In making such an agreement, Ben-Aharon said, "we thought that 'Hazaken' ['The Old Man,' Ben-Gurion's nickname] was out of his mind." To sign such an agreement was tantamount to political cyanide. Who in Israel, barely seven years after the war, would swallow such a deal, which appeared to forgive the Germans for crimes against the Jews? Survivors of the death camps, with their numbered tattoos, were living throughout the country. The opposition—from Menachem Begin on the right to Ben-Aharon and Mapam on the left, and with many in the middle—would repudiate such an agreement.

"How naive and how wrong we were," said Ben-Aharon. Ben-Gurion, he added, correctly judged the "soul of the people." He was right to believe that the Israeli public would accept his agreement with the German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer. "Ben-Gurion was thoroughly political," Ben-Aharon said. "We were not." For the Marxist Ben-Aharon, to be "political" was the highest form of praise. It meant having a sound judgment of what people would do collectively, more than a sound judgment about what any one person would do. In collective behavior, human nuance is often canceled out.

David Ben-Gurion—originally David Green—was born in the Polish town of Plonsk, about forty miles from Warsaw, in 1886. Plonsk had around eight thousand residents, of which about two thirds were Jews, when he left, first for Warsaw in 1904 and then for Palestine in 1906. One can hardly find in Ben-Gurion's long life a trace of social snobism, either in attitude or behavior, but when it came to his rather humble family he felt the need to elevate his father to the standing of a lawyer. In fact, Shapira writes that he was "more of a pettifogger (*Winkeladvokat*) who sat on the corner outside the courthouse."

While in Plonsk, David formed, with two friends, a Zionist youth organization that was dedicated to the

revival of Hebrew. Indeed, with them he spoke only Hebrew, while the Jews of Plonsk (like practically all Jews under the tsar) spoke Yiddish. For Israelis, Ben-Gurion's Hebrew had a distinct, unusual, and excessive stress on the last syllable of each word. The late Benjamin Harshav, a professor of comparative literature at Yale University, shrewdly claimed that Ben-Gurion forced himself to speak that way in order to overcome the European Ashkenazi tendency to stress the penultimate syllable of each word.

At the age of twenty, Ben-Gurion emigrated to Palestine, an experience, to him, of being born again, including assuming a new identity by changing his last name to Ben-Gurion after a leader of the Great Revolt against Rome. A young woman was involved in his move to Palestine: Rachel Nelkin, "the town beauty" of Plonsk. Ben-Gurion's biographer Michael Bar-Zohar once said in an interview that toward the end of his life, Ben-Gurion had confessed to him that she was the love of his life. I don't doubt that Ben-Gurion loved her; I find it hard to believe that he would confess it to Bar-Zohar. Ben-Gurion was capable of emotion but hardly of confession, which he considered a sign of weakness. He lost her to a gentler soul, and she became Rachel Beit-Halakhmi.

When he arrived in Palestine, Shapira writes, Ben-Gurion asked his father to save the letters he sent home, and when he published articles he "cut them out and pasted them in special notebooks for safekeeping." This, Shapira rightly comments, "reflected a feeling that was widespread among people at the time: that they were making history that should be documented."

A year after his arrival, he moved from central Palestine to the north, to Sejera, a village in Lower Galilee. "In Sejera I found the homeland landscape I yearned for so much," he wrote in his memoirs. He worked there, "guiding the oxen along the furrow," and would boast about his pioneering days by describing himself as an "agricultural worker" on official forms. But as he admitted to his father at the time, being a farmer wasn't for him. If you add up all his days cultivating the land—as his biographer Shabtai Tevet did—you end up with thirteen months in total. But this short baptism was enough to convert him into a leader of organized workers.

Broadly, there are three stages in Ben-Gurion's political development that can be distinguished, perhaps more for convenience than for accuracy: socialism, Zionism, and statism. The first stage finds Ben-Gurion as secretary of the Histadrut—the general organization of the trade unions that he helped to found in 1920.

It was in his capacity as the representative of the Histadrut that Ben-Gurion traveled to Russia in 1923. There, he had firsthand experience with Bolshevism and wrote an acute assessment of Lenin: "I don't know if there is any other party in which one man has fulfilled as decisive a role as the leader of the Bolsheviks in Russia.... His words, thoughts, and actions are a constitution." Ben-Gurion seems to have drawn from Lenin a few main lessons: organize and centralize power; define a main goal and keep it clear. To achieve this ultimate goal you must either unite or splinter political forces. In this sense, Ben-Gurion was,

to the end of his life, a Leninist to perfection. A genius in acquiring and consolidating political power, he was also a shrewd observer of the power of others.

In the 1920s, he turned the labor movement in Israel into a political force; in the 1930s and early 1940s, he expanded his scope and turned the global Zionist movement from a semiphilanthropic and semidiplomatic organization into a genuine political power. Between 1948 and 1963, as both prime minister and defense minister, he amassed immense power of his own.

In all these stages Ben-Gurion was always exceedingly focused, but it would be a mistake to describe him as single-minded. His admirers saw him above all as a man of vision endowed with uncanny foresight into the future. In her epilogue, Shapira rightly pokes fun at the idea of Ben-Gurion as a prophet. Many of his predictions did not come true. But the issue is not how accurate his "visions" were. It was his knack for handling power that made him great; it was Ben-Gurion the organizer and the strategist, not Ben-Gurion the prophet or the speaker, that turned him into the leader he was. Unlike Ze'ev Jabotinsky, his major right-wing rival, Ben-Gurion wasn't much of a speaker. He delivered tediously long speeches in a barking metallic voice. But to his credit his speeches were laborious partly because he took his arguments seriously. He genuinely felt the need to justify his positions in order to persuade, rather than seduce.

While he wasn't a good speaker, Shapira is correct to point out that he was a sharp polemicist. Indeed, the impression was that he was so sharp that he couldn't make a point without making an enemy. My friend Menachem Brinker told me that Moshe Sharet, Ben-Gurion's tormented foreign minister, once delivered a speech in which he mentioned the distinction between an open society and a closed one. The leader of Mapam interrupted Sharet. "What are you talking about?" he asked. "What is an open society?" At this point Ben-Gurion intervened. "An open society is one in which a branch of Mapam can be opened."

Early during his time in Palestine, Ben-Gurion translated, from the German, Werner Sombart's book about the history of socialism. It was, as far as I know, the first book on socialism ever translated into Hebrew. Ben-Gurion had a way with languages. When he went to Istanbul to study law, thinking that this would be helpful in dealing with the Ottoman rulers of Palestine, he mastered Turkish in a matter of months. He also learned ancient Greek so he could read Plato, and he even took lessons in Spanish in order to read Cervantes in the original. But his concern with socialism became central after World War I.

He believed that only Zionism saturated with socialism could be effective, for it is only workers who make up a historical force capable of building a new state and a new society. The workers, he believed, must be inspired not only by the prospect of moving to Palestine but also by the prospect of creating a new society along socialist lines.

Yet already in 1924, as the leader of the labor movement, he posed the ques-

tion: Is achieving socialism our main goal? His answer was an emphatic no. "We came here to fulfill a unique goal and that is Zionism: building the country so as to build a new nation," he said in a speech that year.

The tension between the universalist aspiration of international socialism and the particularism of nationalism didn't much trouble Ben-Gurion (the synthesis of nationalism and socialism in the work of the Austrian socialist Otto Bauer seemed to him right on target). If his brand of socialism consisted of strong views weakly held, his brand of Zionism consisted of mild views held strongly. The core of his Zionist conviction can be summarized by one Hebrew word—*aliya*—namely, the free emigration of Jews to Palestine. During his many years as leader, he was will-

David Ben-Gurion



ing to entertain all sorts of political arrangements between Jews and Arabs in Palestine, but on the concept of *aliya* he was never willing to compromise. This was, for him, the essence of Zionism. *Aliya* took precedence over the goal of founding a Jewish state or of reaching a peace agreement with the Arabs. Even as prime minister, he refused to regard anyone in the Diaspora who did not actively plan to emigrate to Israel as Zionist: fellow travelers, yes (or "useful idiots" in Lenin's terminology). But Zionists? No.

Indeed, Ben-Gurion's major decision right after he became prime minister in 1948 was to open the country to any Jews who wanted to come. This was transformative. It meant that a community of some 650,000 people had to absorb, between 1948 and 1953, an immigration of 723,090 people—and it did. Most of the immigrants arrived from Arab countries like Morocco, Yemen, and Iraq and most were not highly educated. I suspect that Ben-Gurion viewed Israel not as a melting pot but as a shipyard: by erecting walls in the water, one can raise the water level inside and elevate the ship; removing the walls would cause the water to level down. The elevated water in this image is the immigration from Muslim countries; the surrounding water is the Arab world; the ship is the State of Israel.

If *aliya* was Ben-Gurion's solution to the Jewish problem, what was his solution to the "Arab problem"—the Yishuv's catchall phrase for the kind of relationship that could and should prevail between Jews and Arabs in Palestine? Ben-Gurion's position, before World War I was that Jews and Arabs had diametrically opposed in-

terests and aspirations and that there was therefore no way to reconcile the two. After the war, during his socialist phase, he saw the conflict as a class conflict and believed that Jews and Arabs could, together, fight exploitative reactionary landowners for the welfare of both communities. As of 1929, following an Arab uprising, he believed that he could reach an agreement with the Arabs by using the formula of federation. And in the aftermath of the great Arab uprising of 1936 he believed that only the partition of Palestine into a Jewish and an Arab state could serve as a solution. It remains unclear, at least to me, which position he held for tactical reasons and which position he actually believed in.

In all his dealings with the Arab world, Ben-Gurion was guided by the idea that Israel shouldn't go to war with Arabs without the support of at least one world power. In 1956, in spite of his initial reservations, he couldn't resist the temptation to join the declining powers of Eden's Britain and Guy Mollet's France to attack Nasser's Egypt. Ben-Gurion was very much part of their joint secret strategy. The results of the attack on Nasser were unmitigated disaster for Britain and France; they were, however, more mixed for Ben-Gurion's Israel. Some military objectives were achieved—mainly the end of Egyptian commando infiltration from Gaza and Sinai into Israel, and the upgrading of Israel's military power in the region. But the menacing image of Israel in the eyes of the third world as an outpost of spent colonial powers can reasonably be traced back to this collusion.

In 1970, three years before his death, Ben-Gurion was interviewed at length on Israeli state television. He was alert, with full command over what he wanted to say. His memory remained intact apart from some stumbling here and there over proper names. I mention these facts because some Israelis, incensed with what he said in the interview, started a rumor that the Old Man was by then not only old but senile.

In that interview, he said that he believed in God—the God of Spinoza, I presume. He said that China would, in the future, become the only superpower in the world. He predicted peace with Egypt in ten years, though, interestingly, for the wrong reason (he thought that it would be reached with the Egyptian intelligentsia, the kind of people who were recently active in the Arab Spring). But all this may have gone unnoticed had he not also said that in order to reach peace Israel should relinquish all the territories conquered in 1967, apart from East Jerusalem and the Golan Heights. A little later he said, "[East] Jerusalem for history's sake and the Golan for security.... Peace is more important than real estate." The only thing of importance to Israel, he said, is *aliya*, and there is plenty of space in the Negev desert for that without the need to remove even one Arab from his land.

A short story by the writer Yosef Haim Brenner—a leading voice in the creation of modern Hebrew literature and himself the subject of another moving biography by Anita Shapira—ends famously with the line: "The accounting is not yet finished." When it comes to Ben-Gurion and Israel, I believe, the accounting is not yet finished. □