

**REFLECTIONS  
ON  
THE BEN-GURION ERA**

***ITS THINKERS AND ITS IMPLEMENTERS***

**by**

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## **REFLECTIONS ON THE BEN-GURION ERA ITS THINKERS AND ITS IMPLEMENTERS**

### ***The Idealist's Spark***

It is 100 years since the birth of David Ben-Gurion. Many events have been scheduled in Ottawa, other centers in Canada and throughout the world where Jews gather and can freely commemorate and celebrate events of the man and his era.

Who was David Ben-Gurion? Even more importantly, what was Ben-Gurion? What era did he represent?

In the coming months this column will examine within a philosophical and literary orientation more what Ben-Gurion was than who he was. The who-he-was, chronologically, can be looked up in any encyclopedia or reference text, in just about any library – that only gives the facts which journalism and dictionaries give; however, this feature will attempt to give the what, the climate – ideological, philosophical and literary – through thinkers and implementers: the environment, as it pertains to the culmination of Ben-Gurion's and of his era's thrust, its implications, ramifications and contradictions. For it is in the examination of the ideological, philosophical and literary climate that the political elements can be more truthfully discussed and more fully felt. Thus, what legacy has he left from the Zionism of his era to that of our own?

This column will attempt to give a *weltanschauung* of Ben-Gurion's times and what he brought us. Where are we situated as Jews living in the free country of Canada? Where are we going as Jews tied to Israel? Where is Israel going? Can a single direction be discerned? Are we at a crossroads – moving in different directions – divergent world-views pulling in different directions? Is there a common denominator – or a center to this movement? Perhaps we can speculate on various scenarios and options.



As time and space limitations create constraints, each article will center around *one main philosophical* theme whose essence will be hopefully penetrated. This will be approached *outside of the realm of chronology*, in accordance with Ben-Gurion's credo: he believed that the past, present and future are relative terms in history (as witnessed below). It is hoped that for readers so inclined an in-depth study on the subject will begin a life-long project on becoming "ambassadors" for Israel.

We begin with what Ben-Gurion was when he arrived in Eretz Israel – an idealist of twenty-two. On his first night in Petach Tikvah he wrote what he saw, scented, heard and felt.

I did not sleep. I was among the rich smell of corn. I heard the braying of donkeys and the rustling of leaves in the orchards. Above were the massed clusters of stars clear against the deep blue firmament. My heart overflowed with happiness as I entered the realm of joy. . . . A dream was celebrating its victory. I am in Eretz Israel, in a Hebrew village in Eretz Israel, in a Hebrew village called Petach Tikvah – Portal of Hope.

This poetic, lyrical vein was the motivation behind the pragmatism. It is the hidden poetry behind the pragmatism that has given the implementers the power behind the idea which becomes indestructible in the long run. In the case of the Jews, it has lasted for 2,000 years and continues – stronger than the tangible Roman civilization that went by the wayside. ("Ben-Gurion" even chose his name as that of one of the last defenders against the Roman legion.)

Why do the implementers become implementers? They want to implement an idea whatever it may be, whether a private or public one, an individual, communal or far-flung group idea. The study of Ben-Gurion is a study of an implementer of a dream, an idea, a vision – which is then incorporated to such a degree that what remains in evidence is only the implementation: the act and not the thought behind

it; however, by such time the thought is so ingrained, so absorbed, so concretized, that implementation becomes not necessarily a conscious action but rather a subconscious reflex action.

An echo of Ben-Gurion's voice in 1944, thirty-seven years after the first night in Petach Tikvah, resounds in 1986.

... the issue is not whether we should look back to the faces of yesterday or those of tomorrow. In history both past and future are relative terms. What was regarded yesterday as the wave of the future may today seem reactionary, and what seemed of no importance yesterday may be a great force tomorrow.

Due to multi-faceted elements – combinations and permutations of possibilities, we know very little of what the future holds; however, Ben-Gurion's words of 1944 are a constant in a sea of variables:

Unity is the imperative of our mission and our destiny. Nonetheless of all the values it is the one that is perhaps most honoured in theory and least respected in practice. . . . Outside forces beyond our control and unforeseen circumstances which we cannot imagine will play their parts in tipping the scales one way or the other. Nonetheless, despite all that, it does depend on us. . . .

It does depend on us.

**REFLECTIONS II**  
***David Ben-Gurion and the Bible***  
***The Man and his Book***

How do we bring David Ben-Gurion into our lives, to feel his presence and symbolically walk and talk with him, participate in active silences with him, in which our thoughts meet - whether in Petach Tikvah, where he first settled, worked on the land, suffered from malaria; or in Sejara, in the Lower Galilee, where he guarded against marauders; or in a small room in Jerusalem in which he wrote articles for the journal, "*Ha'achdut*," the voice of Poalei Zion (Workers of Zion Party); or in Tel Aviv and in foreign capitals where his labour and political organizational activities co-designed a blueprint for the creation of the State; or in Jerusalem where he declared the State and strolled along the streets with his cabinet colleagues, accompanied by the prophets; or in the battlefields where he gave encouragement to his soldiers; or in the cities of western and eastern countries where he met philosophers, politicians and the ordinary people; or in the newly-blooming desert valleys of Sde Boker; or on his political return trip to Jerusalem; or on his numerous excursions to Scientific institutions in Israel and abroad; or on his viewing tours of the Israel defense industries to continually ensure that his State is strong.

Since we cannot simultaneously consider the primary books, subjects and places which influenced Ben-Gurion, nor his close friends, though there were but few (as he was consumed by his people and their cause, and could only spare whatever was left of his mental energies, amongst a handful of confidantes and his immediate family). We will begin with his book - the Bible - his compass, the guide to his consciousness from which he oriented his life. By the conclusion of this year-long series, elements of the above will have been considered and brought together, to give us the mood, the spirit and the atmosphere surrounding Ben-Gurion, and an

understanding of the man, in his many integrated dimensions; the culmination of all of these, together, made him the unique personality, practical philosopher, statesman and visionary of the future.

The early October Negev desert air carries a gentle evening breeze as we walk along the narrow paths of Ben-Gurion's Kibbutz, Sde Boker. He chose this as his retirement dwelling from politics, to exemplify to the youth of Israel and the diaspora, the challenge of reclaiming the desert and making it flower.

Although physically he is no longer with us, his presence accompanies us as we discuss the Bible and contemplate his words:

Only the people which settles anew on its land, and comes to terms with the landscape which shines out of every page of the Book of Books – and the language of the Book will become its national tongue, in which it will think and dream, knowingly or unknowingly – to this nation only will the Book unfold the secret of its heart and its inner soul, and the soul of the Book will become one with the soul of the people.

Not a formally observant Jew, adhering to or fulfilling religious tenets or rituals, a "religious" one nonetheless, Ben-Gurion's *élan vital*, breath of life's purpose, inspiration, was drawn from the Bible.

The State of Israel will not be treated by its strength or economy alone, but by its spirit. We have inherited a great heritage, and it is binding.

To Ben-Gurion, the rebirth of the State of Israel and the renaissance of the Jewish nation was the link with the independent Jewish existence of two thousand years ago, which began its origins with Abraham, who too came on *Aliyah* to the land which God had promised him.

To Ben-Gurion, it was not enough to have a land – it was to be a light unto the nations, a model of justice and democracy to all mankind. As the sun sets on the low desert horizon, Isaiah and Micah approach us, explaining their visions for the future. (Ben-Gurion did not agree with the "end of days" or "latter days" terminology; for him, it was a continuation, a new beginning which was forever blooming.)

As Isaiah and Micah join us, Spinoza and Plato are listening attentively and do not feel out of place; Ben-Gurion counted them amongst his friends, and the ages which separated him from them, have no more consequence than that which separated him from the prophets who were always with him.

Ben-Gurion's sentences mingle with the whispers of the shifting desert sands in the distance as his spirit reminds us of past triumphs: "The Israeli Defense Forces . . . has renewed Jewish heroism in all its glory . . . such as perhaps never been witnessed since the day of Joshua, son of Nun and King David."

To harmonize the Scriptures with current affairs was inherent in Ben-Gurion. His attachment to the Bible and to the land of Israel were synonomous. Comprehension of the Bible, even the Bible contests which he established, was not to debate it as a detached, intellectual, exegetical exercise but to live its significance wherein the past coincides with the present, and points the way to the future.

The moving force of history was for Ben-Gurion enveloped in a "Spiritual, Eternal, All-Embracing, Supreme-Being." And, it is with this acknowledgement, that Ben-Gurion began a radio address on Israel's first anniversary of Independence in 1949: "The hearts of all of us overflow with praise and thanks to the Rock of Israel." It is this phrase rather than "God," which was used in the Declaration of Independence, in order not to confine the unconfineable, to any definition, but rather to exemplify anthropomorphologically one more amongst the unlimited characteristics.

To plant a tree and envisage the concept of a Supreme God was for Ben-Gurion, one and the same as he reflected on *Genesis 21:33*.

'And Abraham planted a tamarask tree in Beersheva, and called there on the name of the Lord, the Everlasting God.' Only the ancient Jewish genius has the capacity and the boldness to combine one verse with such concise simplicity, two such different and profoundly significant acts.

Ben-Gurion's spirit in Sde Boker is embodied in the partnership between man and God; God gave man the faculties to fulfill a purpose which He would oversee but which, according to Ben-Gurion, man must initiate. It is this which continues to plant trees while the Negev breezes (*breath-ruach*) call on the name of the Lord, the Everlasting God.

As we continue our walk in the here and now, with Ben-Gurion in his there and then, an image confronts us (just as Winston Churchill hoped to paint in the heavens for a million years): David Ben-Gurion converses with the prophets there as he did here.

### **REFLECTIONS III**

#### **Ben-Gurion and Berl Katzenelson**

##### **The Man and His Friend**

*(On what shall we build the "new" Zionism - Not, what shall we discard?)*

To know David Ben-Gurion is to recognize the major influence of books in his life, particularly that of the Bible (*Reflections II*). His Zionist *setzgeist* (the general intellectual, moral and cultural state of the era) in true paradox did not reflect one era but bore the biblical timelessness wherein the past, present and future blended into one (*Reflections I*).

To become acquainted with Ben-Gurion and to bring him into our lives through this series is also to share segments of thoughts and sparks of spirit of the very few confidantes he invited into his existence and whose friendships left their imprint on him. One such friend was Berl Katzenelson, but more than a friend, he was Ben-Gurion's mentor.

Born in the White Russian city of Bobruisk, disillusioned by the growing variety of socialist-assimilationist "solutions" to the Jewish problem, Katzenelson came to Palestine in 1909 at the age of twenty-two (during the same period, Second Aliyah, as Ben-Gurion). Life for Katzenelson, as he often repeated, only began from the moment he came to Palestine. This appealed to Ben-Gurion who too started to count his years from the date he arrived in Eretz Israel. The challenge of the future of Palestine drew the two, who considered themselves "adventurers", together.

With his hands, just like Ben-Gurion, Katzenelson worked as a farm labourer, and with his mind and spirit he searched the past and conceived of foundations of moral principles by which to build the "new" Zionism. To Katzenelson, who together with Ben-Gurion would become a key founder of the Histadrut, a labour federation, unique as a trade union, there

was no question of discarding the tenets on which the "old" Zionism was built, but, rather to use its ideological pillars for a labour movement that would assist in building a State "on the foundation of moral principles of justice and of human dignity" within which to house the "old-new" independent nation.

According to Katzenelson:

... A renewing and creative generation does not throw cultural heritage of ages into the dustbin. It examines and scrutinizes, accepts and rejects. At times it may keep and add to an accepted tradition. At times it descends into ruined grottoes to excavate and remove the dust from that which had lain in forgetfulness, in order to resuscitate old traditions which have the power to stimulate the spirit of the generation of renewal. If a people possesses something old and profound, which can educate man and train him for his future tasks, is it truly revolutionary to despise it and become estranged from it? . . .

From fathers to sons, throughout all the generations, the meaning of the exodus from Egypt has been handed on as a personal experience and it has therefore retained its original luster. 'In every generation everyman must regard himself as if he personally had been redeemed from Egypt.' There is no higher peak of historic consciousness, and history - among all the civilizations of the world and in all the ages - can find no example of a greater fusion of individual with group than is contained in this ancient pedagogic command. . . .

These ancient ideas, incorporated into modern-day implementational realities, Katzenelson expressed in numerous ways, at every national and international forum in Palestine and abroad at which he represented the labour-



Zionist movement. Not on politics but on politicians, did Katzenelson give his cultural Zionist imprint as a journalist, commentator and editorialist.

The Zionist cultural program of the Palestinian Labour Movement was established under Katzenelson's guidance. In 1925, he founded the *Davar* newspaper as the organ of the trade union organization. His love for books, which had motivated him to found a travelling library for farm workers in the first few years of his arrival in Palestine, expressed itself in his having created a Histadrut publishing house, *Am Oved*.. Concretized in this endeavour was the harmony he sought between the modern-labour Zionism and the traditional, timeless heritage of learning passed from generation to generation.

In 1944, the death of Berl Katzenelson came as a severe blow to David Ben-Gurion; the labour movement lost a man who would walk for hours to speak to a single young person who wanted to think and talk; the Labour Zionist Movement lost not its orator but its educator. Berl Katzenelson did not speak to audiences, he discussed with them.

These discussion continue at the institution bearing his name, Beit Berl, and throughout Israel for those willing to delve into the foundations of labour Zionism. A young Katzenelson's words of thanksgiving at his arrival in Palestine, from which he began to count his existence, echo as Ben-Gurion's memories reverberate in our ears: "Berl Katzenelson had a great influence on the Zionist pioneering movement throughout the world, being its brain, conscience and spokesman."

Katzenelson's thoughts inspired Ben-Gurion throughout his life, as their message was and is current:

Our achievements in this country may multiply rapidly, and even after we shall have attained a life of dignity, we shall not say, 'we are redeemed,' until all of our exile has ended. As long as Israel is dispersed and is prey to

persecution and hatred, to contempt and to forced conversion . . . I shall not forget.

. . . How will our people behave after its dispersed have assembled, after its complete liberation from bondage. . . . Perhaps it will celebrate . . . with dance and song, or perhaps it will desire that each child born in liberty and equality, unacquainted with hunger and material oppression, shall know the suffering of all preceding generations. This we shall discuss when that day will come.

\* \* \*

Just as Berl Katzenelson was David Ben-Gurion's mentor - and thus through his friendship with Katzenelson we can understand Ben-Gurion better, we are privileged in the Ottawa community to welcome Yitzhak Navon, former preident of the State of Israel, on October 29, 1986. Mr. Navon will reminisce on David Ben-Gurion, his mentor, friend and political leader during Ben-Gurion's return to Knesset from retirement on an independent slate.

## **REFLECTIONS IV**

### ***Theodor Herzl and David Ben-Gurion Poetry and Law – Vision and Concretization Prologue to Basel and Biltmore***

Leader of our people, spokesman of the nation,  
Dr. Herzl, who stands before kings. God blessed  
me with a superior son. . . . His belly is filled  
with learning . . . and his soul yearns for study.  
I have decided to send him abroad, to study  
science, and several people have advised me to  
send him to Vienna. . . . Thus, I am bringing  
this account before my lord so that he may  
command my son. . . .

So wrote Avigdor Green, David's (Ben-Gurion) father in November 1901 to Theodor Herzl, without his son's knowledge. Whether a response to this plea was ever issued by Herzl is not known; what is known, however, is that Destiny did reply.

What was the fire that burned in David when already at the age of ten, he had founded his own Zionist society, which Avigdor and Sheindel (his mother), together with the parents of other little activists, had disbanded, telling their children they were too young for political activity?

One year later, when David's mother died, he was despondent; and only gradually did his Zionist fervour rekindle him to life.

An independent child, at the age of twelve, David affirmed that he would live his life according to his goal. Thus, his preoccupations with the Zionist movement and eventual allayh consumed his intentions and actions.

In 1904 (while in Warsaw), when he found out that Herzl had died, of physical and mental exhaustion at the age of

forty-four, David lamented, "It was as though the world was coming to an end;" and he later wrote to a friend:

There will not again arise such a marvelous man. . . . But today more than ever I have faith in and am certain of our victory. It is clear to me that there is a day - a day that's not far off - when we shall return to that wonderful land, the land of song and truth, the land of flowers and of the visionaries' visions.

In 1906, Ben-Gurion reached the land of song and truth, the land of flowers and of the visionaries' visions.

Herzl and Ben-Gurion - although their lives were separated by space and time - both were united in a vision. Significant elements of their backgrounds were similar: one studied law in Vienna, the other in Istanbul. Both lives were imbued with dreams and poetry: Herzl, the pamphleteer (essayist), playwright, journalist; Ben-Gurion, the "poet" of Petach Tikvah, inspired spokesman of the workers' labour movement, journalist. Both decided to implement by right - though the laws of (civilized) nations, international law - what they duly felt belonged to the Jewish people. They used their law to implement their poetry.

In his diary of Shavuoth 1895, Herzl wrote:

I have been occupied for some time past with a work which is of immeasurable greatness. I cannot tell today whether I shall bring it close. It has the experience of a gigantic dream. But for days and weeks, it has filled me, saturated even my subconscious and it occupied me wherever, I go. . . .

What will lead to it is impossible to surmise yet. But my experience tells me it is something marvelous, even as a dream, and that I should write it down . . . for the enrichment of literature. If the romance does not become a fact, at

least, the fact can become a romance. Title:  
*The Promised Land.*

\* \* \*

As Mr. Yitzhak Navon's visit of October 29 approaches ("friendships," *Reflections III*), I share an image with the readers: David Ben-Gurion, at the close of a cabinet meeting, rushes to a Spanish language lesson taught by his executive assistant, Yitzhak Navon, so that he could read Spinoza and Cervantes in the original - imbued with biblical philosophy and the chasing of windmills - to see him through another hard day and tomorrow's practical decisions.

## **REFLECTIONS V**

### **Basel and Biltmore**

"The idea which I have developed in this pamphlet is an ancient one: it is the restoration of the Jewish State." So begins the preface of Dr. Theodor Herzl's *Judensdadt* (*The Jewish State* - published in 1896).

After covering the Dreyfus case for the leading Viennese paper, Herzl became convinced of the need for a "State" within recognized international structures and guarantees.

The "modern day Moses", however, decided that the "idea" of a sovereign state could be implemented only through negotiations; and he became the statesman of the people before the Sultan of Turkey, Kaiser Wilhelm, the King of Italy, Pope Plus X. Just as his "ancient" but timeless princely model, who had been educated at the "Oxfords" and "Harvards" of Egypt, and thus spoke to Pharaoh with secular "sophistication" in the King's Egyptian and through his thought process, Herzl, with his royal bearing, too proclaimed in the ruling palaces, a new era for his people which would once again culminate in Jews reestablishing their homeland.

On August 29, 1897, two hundred delegates, representatives of the Jewish communities, responded to his call and founded the World Zionist Congress.

Herzl's diary entry of September 3, 1897 demonstrates that he crossed the "Red Sea" from a visionary's dream to a realist's blueprint.

... At Basel, accordingly, I have created the abstraction which, as such, is imperceptible to the great majority. [At bottom with infinitesimal means] I gradually worked the people up into the atmosphere of a State and made them feel that they were its national assembly.

And for that, the Congress had constructed the (Basel) program upon which to build a legal structure for the State:

1. The settlement in Palestine of farmers, artisans and labourers in such a manner as serves the purpose. [On this qualification Herzl insisted, to demonstrate his opposition to an immigration trickle without political guarantees.]
2. The organization and union of the whole of Jewry in suitable local and general bodies, in accordance with the laws of their respective countries.
3. The strengthening of the Jewish national feeling and national consciousness.
4. Preparatory steps to obtain governmental consent necessary to achieve the goals of Zionism. [To ensure Herzl's diplomatic credentials for his "shuttle diplomacy" on behalf of the Zionist movement.]

Whereas for Herzl it was the Dreyfus case that convinced him that no other solution existed, for Ben-Gurion it was the abrogation of the Balfour declaration and the League of Nations Mandate through the infamous "white paper" of 1939, which restricted Jewish immigration and curtailed land purchases in Palestine. Ben-Gurion recognized that Britain could no longer be depended on for its support; and that after the War, it would be the United States that would emerge as the super-power. Nevertheless Ben-Gurion supported the War on behalf of Britain "with our bodies, our souls, our capital, our might," as if the "white paper" did not exist; but he also decided to fight the "white paper" to gain a homeland.

At the Biltmore Hotel, in New York, on May 12, 1942, to the six hundred delegates of all the Zionist movements Ben-Gurion had convened, he announced the "Biltmore program." The vision was concretized – the Jews must control their own destiny. Never again would Jewish existence be dependent on

the tolerance or even the good will of other governments. It would have to be based on international legal structures and guarantees.

The new world order that will follow victory cannot be established on foundations of peace, justice and equality unless the problem of Jewish homelessness is finally solved. The Conference urges:

1. that the gates of Palestine be opened to Jewish immigration;
2. that the Jewish Agency be vested with control of immigration into Palestine and with the necessary authority for up-building the country, including the development of its unoccupied and uncultivated lands;
3. that Palestine be established as a Jewish Commonwealth, integrated in the structure of the new democratic world.

From labour and Zionist leader, Ben-Gurion emerged as statesman of what was to become the reborn Jewish State. Two days before his death, Avigdor Green, Ben-Gurion's father, had lived to hear his son pronounce the words of the Biltmore program, world-wide. Basel and Biltmore; Herzl and Ben-Gurion had "met" as Avigdor had hoped when he had addressed his letter to Dr. Theodor Herzl in November, 1901 (*Reflections IV*).



## **REFLECTIONS VI**

### ***Ben-Gurion -The Writer***

#### ***From Writing to Speaking to More Writing***

Ottawa and Boston were "too busy" to book "him". In Buffalo, Ben-Gurion became ill with diphtheria and could not resume his activities for weeks. Toronto reported that "he isn't a public speaker." Montreal cancelled his appearance. . . .

After expulsion from Palestine by the Turks on March 21, 1915 for his Zionist writing and organizational activities (which were based at the *Ha'achdut* journal, the voice of Poalei Zion, the Workers of Zion), Ben-Gurion together with Yitzhak Ben-Zvi, another member of the journal's editorial board, sailed to the United States.

It was in New York that Ben-Gurion continued his mission from the American Poalei Zion headquarters. Through a speaking tour, Ben-Gurion initiated the campaign to recruit a "pioneer army", the Hehalutz. The War, the Turks, the British were considered temporary obstacles. What was important was for the Hehalutz to rebuild the "Old New Land" after the War. Upon completion of this first tour, Ben-Gurion's balance sheet read 19 Hehalutz volunteers (Ben-Zvi's, 44).

The cold audiences released a longing for the fire of purpose in Ben-Gurion's soul. The child-activist from Plonsk and the writer from Jerusalem triumphed over the depressed speaker - finally bringing the vision of Jerusalem to Minneapolis, Galveston, Chicago and Milwaukee.

After a three-month circuit, although more successful than initially, Ben-Gurion returned to New York with only one hundred persons committed to Hehalutz. Convinced that lectures reached few, Ben-Gurion again turned to writing to transmit the voice of the "potential" Israel and its echo of the centuries to the people.

Under what form, in what context, should such a message appear? New York inspired the medium: an adventure book in Yiddish about the watchmen of Eretz Israel! Winning first interest and then approval, it became a best seller among Jews. And Ben-Gurion, the writer, was invited to speak in every Jewish community friendly to Zionism.

In a tribute to Ben-Gurion on his 70th birthday, his colleague, eventual president of Israel, Zalman Shazar, recalled a Zionist meeting several decades earlier, during which Ben-Gurion felt isolated in his views, as he often did. Responding to the accusations of "experts", Ben-Gurion said, "I am not an expert on irrigation or famine or world politics. There is only one field in which I am an expert." The delegates demanded to know what that was. "Zionism," he replied, "that is the subject in which I am an expert."

Throughout his life Ben-Gurion regarded himself as a writer. The policy orientation of his work to recreate Eretz Israel and to provide directions for the State once established, was the implementation of the spirit which motivated his writing.

To Ben-Gurion, the Jewish people possessed a "secret weapon" to which he alluded during one Knesset meeting. Years later, when asked what that weapon was, "the spirit," he answered. Power was not in economic growth nor in military might which were manifestations of the spirit utilizing material forces. For him, the Jews or any people who survived, had to be immersed and self-possessed of spirit. If the spirit was felt, the people were capable of anything. Thus, it would be needless to recount all of which it was capable; all that is necessary is to marvel, to sense the awe of the spirit's presence in every sphere.

Men have fought for their opinions no less than for their power or property, and since man began to think, the contest of ideas has not ceased. And in the history of our people, this occupies a place greater, perhaps, than in that of any other.

To describe himself, Ben-Gurion, in an introduction to his writings and speeches, wrote in 1955: "The writer began as one of the workers in this land. . . . These 30 years . . . naturally left their traces upon the soul of the writer. . . . The soul of the world and of our people has undergone severe and bitter trials and the writer too did not remain closed and locked away from all the changes and transitions."

## **REFLECTIONS VII**

### ***David Ben-Gurion - Labour Leader with His Head in the Stars and His Feet on the Ground***

August 26, 1928

Evening twilight. The sight of the sea, the boat is sailing, the waves caressing. Silence. . . . The sky is studded with bright agitated twinkling sparks. Depression is in my heart. . . . What is the meaning of all our wretched existence. . . .

In the cabin David Ben-Gurion is writing in his diary; the confined space does not restrict us from reading over his shoulder. Aboard ship Ben-Gurion is destined for yet another meeting to shore moral and financial support for the Histadrut (National Trade Unions Organization).

This struggle had gone on now for ten years since Ben-Gurion returned to Palestine from the United States to unite the labour movement. But what was a decade in the history of this ancient people. Ancient people - nationhood; Paula, Geula, Amos, Renana. . . . Purpose, responsibilities to his people, to his wife, to his children. . . .

No, he cannot sleep, perhaps a panorama of the universe will fill the void of the family he left behind. From the deck Ben-Gurion looks at the ocean and his thoughts meander with the rhythm of the waves; they fill the emptiness ahead and accompany him and us.

Without Jewish labour nothing would be built in the land of their fathers but one more wretched ghetto, which would disappoint the hopes of generations and dispel the vision of redemption.

Not that he always agreed with Chaim Weizmann (a renowned scientist and world Zionist leader who would become the first President of the State of Israel), for he often did not, but Weizmann was right, he felt, when in a speech, only four years ago, Weizmann warned:

The rising stream of immigration delights me. . . . Nor do I underrate, the importance of this immigration for our work of reconstruction. Our brothers and sisters of Djika and Nalevki (ghetto districts of Warsaw) are flesh of our flesh and blood of our blood. But we must see to it that we direct this stream and do not allow it to deflect us from our goal. It is essential to remember that we are not building our National Home on the model of Djika and Nalevki.

Ben-Gurion recognized that his dream of a united labour party would lead the way towards national and universal redemption. But, how many more steps would he have to take and how many more times would he have to leave Palestine? How much longer would he have to convince his people and direct his energies towards harmonizing disparate groups rather than solidifying and building towards nationhood? Both would have to be accomplished simultaneously.

An agreement had to be arrived at, Ben-Gurion believed; all the parties had to merge if the state was to come into existence. This, he felt, was the pioneer's vision, a united Jewish labour movement.

After a year which seemed as if all meetings became one, it was 1929. Arab riots and the indifference of the British mandatory regime forced the reality that the labour factions could not be solely economic entities. To work for the all-encompassing goal, they had to strengthened, and that could be effected only by amalgamating them and creating a cohesive force that would withstand political, military and economic threats of the present and the future.

Before Ben-Gurion, the man and the Secretary General of the Histadrut, retires for the night, in his diary, he expresses his hope and his purpose: "Histadrut is forcing all the parties ... to work for the good of Palestine."

## **REFLECTIONS VIII**

### ***Woe to Your Zionism***

Let me inform you gentlemen that Zionism has no content if you do not constantly bear in mind the building of a Jewish state. And such a state is only possible on the basis of a maximum number of workers. And if you cannot understand that, woe to your Zionism.

Although the labour movement was united by 1930, the echoes of his intervention, to a barrage of criticism at the 1925 Zionist Congress, never left David Ben-Gurion. It served a dual purpose - to haunt him into recognizing again and again that so much still had to be accomplished to make Jews understand, and also to fortify him in difficult moments. His words would remind him of his friend and mentor Berl Katzenelson (*Reflections III*) and of the philosopher of "the sanctity of labour," A.D. Gordon.

Gordon was born into a wealthy family in Russia, arriving in Palestine in 1904, at the age of 48. He decided to live by the "labour of his hands." Like Leo Tolstoy, Gordon advocated, through essays and articles, his philosophy of love for nature and of dignity which "can only come of the work of one's hands," thus pointing to man's mission and happiness.

For Ben-Gurion, whether he was at the Kinneret or in Jerusalem, whether in New York or in Tel Aviv, Gordon's vision was as relevant after the state was created as it was before. "The ideal of labour must become the pivot of all our aspirations. It is the foundation upon which our national structure is to be erected."

Ben-Gurion's earliest memories recalled the questions he asked himself. From *stetl* to state building how was the transition to be bridged? What instrument would bring this ancient people, united by their attachment to a soil, to modern nationhood?

Ben-Gurion believed that the answer, although rooted in the past, was directed towards the future in the pioneering vision of an all-encompassing labour movement that would lead the way to a state. According to Ben-Gurion such a state would be democratic and just and would serve as a light unto the nations. Although his goal was fixed from the time of the childhood meetings he held in his home in Plonsk, Ben-Gurion's resolve was strengthened by thoughts which to him were more powerful than all the armies which had dispersed his people throughout history.

The thoughts of A.D. Gordon were known in Palestine even before he made *aliyah*. Though it was his essay, *People and Labour*, written in 1911, that inspired a generation. "A vital culture far from being detached from life embraces it in all its aspects. Culture is whatever life creates for living purposes. Farming, building and road-making - any work, any craft, any productive activity - is part of culture. . . . It sustains science, creeds and ideologies."

From that which was most mundane to that which was loftiest, Ben-Gurion accorded equal purpose. Thus, he advocated and was an exemplar of Gordon's advice to the would-be-citizen that would bring about the state. "Let me put it more bluntly: In Palestine, we must ourselves do all the work, from the least strenuous, cleanest and most sophisticated, to the dirtiest and most difficult for then we shall have a life of our own."

This philosophy motivated Ben-Gurion's leadership which culminated in the Histadrut becoming a comprehensive force in every sphere of Israel's life - from the school system, the health system, the newspaper *Davar*, the industrial enterprises, the public utilities, to the dramatic company Ohel. The Histadrut had a direct bearing on three-quarters of the Jewish working population of Palestine. It had become the central force in the Yishuv. And by 1933, Ben-Gurion's struggles for a prominent place in the World Zionist Organization were over. He had successfully brought labour into its leadership with himself at the helm. It would be this



leadership which would, in 1935, bring about his chairmanship of the Jewish Agency from which he would become Israel's first prime minister in 1948.

A.D. Gordon's reflection in *Our Tasks Ahead* written in 1920, just two years before his death in Kibbutz Degania, could have served as the guiding principle of the Histadrut and of the labour governments that followed. "We must draw our inspiration from our land, from life on our soil, from the labour we engage in. . . ."

\* \* \*

Gordon, although not an observant Jew, believed in a mystical bond between the Jews and Eretz Israel.

To this, it must be added that similar ideas were rewoven and met in the air of Palestine; reflections of the eventual first Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of Israel, Rav Abraham Isaac Kook, and of the existentialist philosopher Martin Buber, were swept into this era's landscape of Eretz Israel, and thus into subsequent issues of this column.

## REFLECTIONS IX

### **Rav Kook - The Bridge Between Secular and Religious Zionists**

*The truly righteous do not  
complain about wickedness  
but add righteousness;  
do not complain about heresy  
but add faith;  
do not complain about ignorance  
but add wisdom.*

In his apodictic poem, Rav Abraham Yitzhak Hacohen Kook, Eretz Israel's first Ashkenazi chief rabbi, who died 51 years ago, actually personified himself.

This man of *shalom bayit* attempted to make peace in the house of Israel by what he believed was the essence of Judaism. His program called for renewing the old and hallowing the new.

The labour Zionist philosophy of Berl Katzenelson, David Ben-Gurion's friend and mentor, and that of A.D. Gordon, intermingle and are swept into the pre-state of Israel landscape with the religious Zionist theology of Rav Kook.

Born in 1865, in Latvia, Rav Kook came on *aliyah* to Palestine in 1904, two years before Ben-Gurion arrived. To fulfil his mystic wish, Kook settled in Palestine, in the "spiritual center of world Jewry," to become one of the pioneers of Zion. Here, he believed, a Jew regains his roots and vital force.

From the spiritual center, Rav Kook built the bridge upon which the religious Zionists would meet and work together with secular labour Zionists. He sought an integration of orthodoxy, Zionism and liberalism which together, he

proclaimed, expressed the goal of holiness. The official Mizrachi Zionist platform, drawn up by the brilliant orthodox historian Z'ev Javitz, echoed Rav Kook's nationalist credo: "Zion and Torah are two sanctities that supplement and imply each other."

The Torah and the commandments, for Rav Kook, implied love for the Jewish people, and that included the humanist ideals of the Zionist movement.

Return to Zion is a sacred principle, he extolled; and the Zionist movement was an instrument by which to witness Torah in the world, "both a political Torah that would foster peace and freedom ... and a religious Torah enlightened by the knowledge of Divine truth and the love of God's ways in the life of the individual and society."

Rav Kook taught that the ultimate purpose of God's creation was to redeem not only Israel but all mankind, with Israel as a symbol of justice, truth and loving kindness: "We have here a force that, despite all estrangement, contains a vital spark of holiness, waiting to be fanned into fuller life, through loving faithful hands."

Religious Israelites disillusioned with religious "extremists," and secular Israelis disappointed with skepticism, the void of a Higher moral purpose or of a universal essence in the Jewish predicament, now quote Rav Kook: "The sacred and the secular together influence the human spirit, and man is enriched by absorbing from each whatever is suitable." In this way, they shun the dogmatic approach of both camps who have refused to fill the abyss between them.

The spirit of Rav Kook hovers above modern Israel and attempts to be heard: "Man cannot fly off to Paradise merely by pronouncing his faith." He must first learn to live with, and care for, his fellow man. All the rest is left to God.

## **REFLECTIONS X**

### ***Martin Buber – Zionism not only a Goal but a Means***

The establishment of the State of Israel, was it the fulfillment of the aim of Zionism? According to David Ben-Gurion, it was.

In the late 1950's and 60's, a debate, although passionate, nevertheless based on mutual respect and admiration, raged between the philosopher-theologian, Martin Buber (who immigrated to Palestine in 1938 from Nazi Germany) and the philosopher-statesman, David Ben-Gurion. Zionism, Buber proclaimed, is not only a goal but a means. "... true Zionism is like 'the City of the great King' (*Isaiah* 6:5). . . . A living and enduring thing" (*Israel and the World*). It does not happen, it must be strived for continually. A true Zionist never becomes satisfied with being, but perpetually longs to becoming, more and more, righteous – more worthy to be a light amongst the nations. Zionism, to Buber, is a dialogical process, in constant action, forever in motion, never static. Buber held that the independence and establishment of the State of Israel is a condition of Zionism, but not its fulfillment.

"The basic teaching that fills the Hebrew Bible is that our life is a dialogue between the above and the below." (*The Dialogue Between Heaven and Earth*) According to Buber, the Bible is the book of the I-Thou relationship between the people of Israel and God; however, a third partner is essential to this dialogue and that is the Land of Israel. Buber, the philosopher of dialogue, world acclaimed for his book *I and Thou*, taught that "the land, is not merely a living being, but it is also the partner in a moral, God-willed and God-guaranteed association." Zionism, therefore, unlike other national movements, is named, not for a people, but for a place, a holy place, a holy city, extolled by the prophets and the psalmist (*Psalms* 48). In the city of God, in Zion, God alone is King,

therefore no man is subjugated to another; that gives it spiritual strength, as a light to the country itself, and eventually to the world, a beacon of righteousness and kindness.

Every relationship, for Buber, requires moral scrutiny. Its aim is to ensure that each partner to a dialogue, each "I" endeavours to approach the "other" as a "thou," a subject, not an "object," not an "it." Thus, meaning that each "I" approach the "thou," not for a use, as an instrument, a tool, but a comprehensive entity, each individual representing a unique world, in God's image; and God, as the "Thou of thous," whose immanence permeates all His creation but also transcends it. The Kingship of God, therefore, implies, in Zion, in Israel, complete equality amongst men, a true democracy based on a model of justice and compassion, and only then can the people call themselves holy. Holiness, for Buber, is not a fact, or a title, given by God, but a task, a goal.

The reason, "God chose Israel," Buber states in his essay *Hebrew Humanism*, was not merely to elect but to demand: ". . . a truth and righteousness and He does not demand for certain isolated spheres of life, but for the whole life of man, for the whole life of the people. . . ."

In an open letter to Mahatma Gandhi in 1939, describing the diabolical persecution of the Jews by the Nazis and the essence of Zionism, Buber explained that "what is decisive for us is not the promise of the Land, but the demand, whose fulfillment is bound up with the Land."

"Zion," Buber wrote to a critic, "signifies to me no divine security but a God-given chance."

## **REFLECTIONS XI**

### ***"A Light unto the Nations" – Am Segulah***

From the same desert wilderness of Zin where Moses wandered with the children of Israel some 3,300 years ago, David Ben-Gurion, in 1955, at the age of sixty-nine, stepped aside from his voluntary retirement duties as a shepherd and a chronicler in Kibbutz Sde Boker, and answered the call of our people to take over the defense portfolio and within one year to resume the prime ministership. (At which time, once again, the Red Sea (and the Straits of Tiran) would present a danger from the ancestral land of the pharaohs; and it would be Ben-Gurion who would lead the nation and open the sea in the Sinai Campaign. But this, he would not do alone!)

On his return to the Knesset, having lived in the solitary barrenness of sand where the horizon meets the land, as if in a neverending expanse of space and time, Ben-Gurion pronounced the following words:

I cannot say that this year I learned new things...  
but it seems to me I saw things more clearly than it is  
perhaps possible from the confines of an office. And  
I shall tell you briefly what I saw:  
Too much desert and wasteland  
and too little settlement and development;  
Too much concentration and crowding in the towns...  
and too little population on the borders;  
Too many debates and servants  
and too few productive workers;  
Too much pursuit of comfort, luxury and riches  
and too little productivity and pioneering  
initiative;  
Too many splits and quarrels  
and too little joint effort and overall  
responsibility;

Too many phrases about Jewish unity and brother  
hood  
and too little real help to the newcomers;  
Too many demands from the State  
and too few demands of ourselves;  
Too many requests for rights  
and too little fulfilment of responsibility.

Ben-Gurion may have believed that the establishment of the State of Israel was the culmination of the aim of Zionism (*Reflections X - re Martin Buber*); however, for Israel, the land and the people, he had a prophetic vision: of Moses, Ben-Gurion said, he gave us a timeless message. "You are a nation of God. This means you must be *Am Segulah*," - Neither "special" nor "superior" but a "unique" nation that should pursue truth, justice and compassion. *Am Segulah*, for Ben-Gurion, was of a different dimension - a task, an added responsibility, a virtue born of conscience - listening to what Elijah described as the "still small voice".

In the words of Isaiah, which he repeated throughout his life, "I, the Lord have called thee in righteousness and have taken hold of thy hand and kept thee and set thee for a Covenant of the people, for a light unto the nations." (*Isaiah* 42:6). Ben-Gurion believed that for as long as Israel (the people) is Israel (embodies itself in its mission), a people, true to itself as an *Am Segulah*, then Israel, the people and the land will endure.

Once Ben-Gurion felt that the State's first few years of the highest level of the state of emergency, requiring the government's attention, were over, he convened the philosophers, Martin Buber and Hugo Bergmann, to discuss in public conferences, the range of spiritual ideals for Israel's development, demanded by the judges, prophets and sages (not of old but forever current).

As essential for Israel as the practicalities of survival and life, quoting the Talmud, Ben-Gurion asserted: "Where there

is no bread, there is no Torah but also where there is no Torah there is no bread."

To dream for Ben-Gurion was a practical necessity: "You cannot reach for the higher virtue without being an idealist. . . . The Jews are chronic idealists which makes me humbly glad to belong to this people and to have shared in their noble epic."

Every generation needs men who question, struggling to attain a higher virtue." For a question, in this generation brings a response, if not now, then in the next - the goal is first to question, it is the question that awakens "the still small voice of conscience."



## **REFLECTIONS XII**

### ***Peace is Approaching***

The desire for peace was unequivocal for David Ben-Gurion. How it would come about, and when, merged into the unsolved millennial mysteries of the universe. The question and the answer of peace is a paradox which preoccupied him.

A few years before Ben-Gurion died, he said: "Often enough, I am asked to predict when and how peace will come to Israel. I am always obliged to give a disappointing answer by confessing I have no predictions to make. That the situation is highly complex is self-evident, with everything that happens in the Middle East bearing upon the international political scene and, obviously, vice versa."

Although Israel needs secure borders to defend itself until the time for armies, as prophesized by Isaiah, would no longer exist, peace not territory was an essential component of Ben-Gurion's vision. That vision encompassed the discoveries and technology of the modern world, integrated with, and implementing, the teachings of the prophets. A peace that is secured, not by war, not by power politics, not by master-race theories but by an inward struggle towards righteousness. According to Ben-Gurion, our future had to be based on two elements, "*Kochetnu V'Zidhatenu*, the strength and justice of our cause."

In that cause, Ben-Gurion envisioned the Ark and the Covenant as symbols: The Ark – as a refuge, and the Covenant as the dynamics of Jewish life. The one, passive, necessary as a haven; the other, active, as an instrument by which to live and continually forge towards a goal of higher attainment, of self-actualization – striving always towards the ultimate potential, as a people, and as a land.

That striving, according to Ben-Gurion, required more than the small population of Israel, it needed the Jews of the diaspora. In this vein, Ben-Gurion made his last public

statement on October 16, 1973, his eighty-seventh birthday. It was during the Yom Kippur War and – although the worst was over as the Israeli army was advancing in the North and the South – the mood was somber and the urgency of a hospital intensive-care ward prevailed: "As long as the people of Israel remain small in number they will face the world alone; but when there is a big, strong nation in Israel, it will dwell securely among the nations and many will seek its friendship." Ben-Gurion hoped for the day that four and a half million Jews would live in Israel. "Then I would no longer fear for Israel's future."

In conversation with an interviewer shortly before his death, Ben-Gurion said: "First, never forget that historically this country belongs to two races. . . . Second, remember the Arabs drastically outbreed us, and to insure survival, a Jewish state must at all times maintain within her own borders an unassailable Jewish majority. (In 1949, when Yigal Allon pleaded with him to allow the army to capture the West Bank, Ben-Gurion replied, "If Israel took over the West Bank, what would it do with all the Arabs? If it made them Israeli citizens, Israel would no longer be a Jewish state. If it denied them citizenship, it would no longer be a democratic state. And if it chased them out, it would no longer be a civilized state.") Third, the logic of all this is that to get peace, we must return in principle to the pre-1967 borders. . . . ("In principle" meant the exception of the entire city of Jerusalem and the Golan Heights, which he specified, respectively, to those who led him across the Temple Mount to the Western Wall, immediately after the Old City's capture, and to Yitshak Navon, after he had arranged for Ben-Gurion to be flown by helicopter above the Heights.) Peace is more important than real estate. Militarily defensible borders, while desirable, cannot by themselves guarantee our future. . . . Real peace with our neighbours, mutual respect and even affection – that is our only true security. Then together we could turn the Middle East into a second Garden of Eden and one of the great creative centers of the Earth."

Ben-Gurion always counted himself an optimist: "The Jews have always been optimists. They have had little to make them so during a long and careworn history. . . . That the victims of Auschwitz could say: 'Next year in Jerusalem.' seems at first grasp almost outrageous in its brightness when the individual must despair. But then one sees the nobility of a statement that denies the enemy his victory while offering unshakeable faith in one's own. . . ."

At the age of eighty-four, in 1970, Ben-Gurion wrote to his childhood confidante, "There is hope, dear Rachel, that peace is approaching, not quickly, but slowly, slowly, and . . . it appears to me that by the end of this century the prophecy of Isaiah will be fulfilled."

## REFLECTIONS XIII

### *Be Strong and of Good Courage*

### *Ben-Gurion and the Defense of Israel - Part I*

There are times and subjects wherein only the original words will do. To do otherwise would be to lessen the power of their significance and the strength of character whence they came. In the following article, divided into two parts, my aim is to tie together in the mode of dramatization; and thus, through dialogue span the decades in retrospection.

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"To David Ben-Gurion - at your orders he fought, and at your orders he fell; may your name be blessed." As he read the dedication from a parent of a soldier who fell, Ben-Gurion, a man not given to expressing his emotions, covered his face with his hands and in the solitude of the moment looked back and thought.

On this August, 1948 evening, Moshe Gurari, a colleague, discovered the Prime Minister in his office where he had taken refuge from a reception for visiting Zionist leaders. Ben-Gurion found the mood of celebration at the reception unbearable. He was speaking, and yet wasn't speaking, to the intruder. It was as if Ben-Gurion was in the room alone, or, perhaps, surrounded by shadows.

"You know, sometimes I attend soldiers' funerals or take part in meetings of bereaved parents, and I always wonder: no one has yet insulted me, no one has tried, in his grief, to throw a stone at me. No one has shouted at me and called through his pain: 'You wanted a Jewish state and we are paying the price for it; we have lost our sons!'"

Ben-Gurion continually pleaded with, and tried to justify to, himself the death of all those sons. After the United Nations' 1947 Resolution, calling for steps to be taken for the establishment of a State, Israel was invaded; the Jerusalem

population was attacked. "Our neighbours declared themselves our enemies and invited us to plunge into the sea to abandon even that bit of land the whole world recognized as our own. And they set out to conquer us. . . .

"If for no other reason than that of keeping faith with those who died, we knew we must not walk in docility to the charnel refuge from such atrocity. In the name of our persecuted dead we had to fight. If need be, we too would die. But in the manner of Jewish heroes in the Warsaw Ghetto, in Jerusalem besieged by the Romans, at Masada: backs to the wall, giving the enemy no quarter."

Forever in Ben-Gurion's mind were the words he uttered to the Allies (before the creation of the State), when he found out the first details of the "final solution":

"What have you allowed to be perpetrated against a defenseless people, while you stood aside and let it bleed to death, without offering help or succour, without calling on the fiends to stop, in the language of retribution, which alone they would understand? Why do you profane our pain and wrath with empty expressions of sympathy that ring like a mockery in the ears of millions of the damned in the charnel house of Nazi Europe? . . .

"Would you have kept silent if every day thousands of your infants and children had had their skulls cracked against stone pavements and walls?"

Pleading to be allowed to constitute a Jewish division, a Jewish army, he said: "If it is not in your power to put a stop to the slaughter, why do you not let us avenge the blood of millions of our brethren and allow us to take up arms against the Nazis as a Nation, as Jews in a Jewish army, under a Jewish flag?"

## REFLECTIONS XIII

### *Be Strong and of Good Courage*

#### *Ben-Gurion and the Defense of Israel - Part II*

"It is our duty to tell the powers of the world without exception, with all the political humility of a small people and all the moral strength of a son of the Jewish people: the Jewish people in its Land will not be like sheep led to the slaughter. . . . What Hitler did to six million helpless Jews in the ghettos of Europe, no persecuter will do . . . in their homeland."

Now, in 1948, in the independent Jewish State, under the same Jewish flag under which the "Jewish Army" had finally been allowed to fight together with the Allies, David Ben-Gurion pronounced his, and Israel's, oath to itself and to history.

From the podium of the Knesset, on July 1, 1959, Ben-Gurion declared Israel's oft-repeated credo: ". . . If the lips of the victims of the Holocaust move in their graves, they say, 'Be strong and of good courage.'"

Turning the pages of the register of the Israeli Parliamentary debates backwards, thus, hope in the midst of inherited anguish sears through the past into the future of Israel, wherein Ben-Gurion is preoccupied with this theme.

"This is the central point: constant reinforcement, ceaselessly and without pause, of our internal strength here in this country; this is the heart of our foreign policy; this is the entire torah (teaching): to strengthen our moral, economic and military power. For this power, and only this in the final analysis, will be the determining factor in all the talks and disputes and possibly in the battles which we will be compelled to face."

Later, in 1964, from retirement in his small house in Sde Boker from which he watched the desert sun and sand, Ben-

Gurion reread his published words on the Sinai Campaign as he contemplated war and hoped for peace.

"War is the most bitter and serious matter in the life of a people. . . . There is a difference between the absence of peace and war. There are movements which see war as an ideal, national or social, that in war man becomes elevated as it were, and the heroism of a people. . . . We shall make war only out of bitter, unavoidable necessity. . . . We do not rejoice at the prospect of battle."

The battle came again in the lightning war of 1967. Interviewed in the early 70's on his kibbutz oasis in the Negev, Ben-Gurion explained the painful necessity of war that was born of the attack-readiness of the Egyptians and the Syrians: adjacent to Israel's most populated area, the Egyptians in battle formation, having thrown out the United Nations troops and proclaiming the Straits of Tiran and the Port of Ellath closed to Israeli shipping; the Syrians firing from the Golan Heights on the Kibbutzim below; and Israel, because it attacked before it was attacked, was branded the "aggressor."

"At that point, we had one of two choices; we could await in passive apprehension, as the world exhorted us to do and rather in the manner of the European countries before the Second World War, for the Arab 'Anschluss,' as it were. Or we could take preventative action . . . we struck. . . . In the final analysis we had to attack or die. So much for our 'aggressiveness' in the Six Day War."

Battles are won for Israel to survive; soldiers are lost. An image remains; a letter Ben-Gurion wrote a father whose son was killed in action, is reread:

"Every Jew in the world is happy about the victories and the conquests and the independence, [but] there is no joy in my house, for I see always before me these precious sons."

## **REFLECTIONS XIV**

### ***The Birthpangs of the Messiah - Part I***

Standing on the tarmac of Lod Airport, David Ben-Gurion watched the aged Jew kissing the Israeli soil upon his return from two and a half millenia of exile in Yemen; and then another and another - the parade of dark features, bushy eyebrows and penetrating black eyes continued - with each plane load on "Operation: Magic Carpet".

As often as the constraints of office permitted, Ben-Gurion would wait at the airport to welcome the returnees who seemed to have stepped out of the torah scroll; and instead of walking across the Red Sea, they flew above it: the men, in embroidered caps, curly locks and many in flowing white robes, and the women, in an array of peacock-coloured long dresses, adorned in hand-carved silver filigree necklaces and bracelets - most of them barefoot.

Time had stood still for this wave of brethren. It was as if not only had space stood still in that he and they, together, found themselves in the land of their mutual ancestors, but as if the days of Isaiah and Micah simply had gone on without interruption.

In 1949, Ben-Gurion feared the aerial exodus from Yemen would slacken on account of pressure generated by his cabinet colleagues, "experts in economics." These "experts," as if it had to be explained, argued that many of the *olim* were old, ill or children; and the State, with its limited resources, was not even two years old. What was Ben-Gurion's response? He issued an order to expedite the process: "Better [the aged Yemenite] should die here in this land among his brethren, and not in a foreign place." Sadly he watched as some died upon arrival from disease, others too weak to absorb food. "This," Ben-Gurion said, "was one of the most frightful pictures I have ever seen in my life. Only in their eyes did the light of life shine. ... I was left trembling and shaken by this



great and awesome sight. Yes - these are the birthpangs of the Messiah."

Despite physical and financial pressures, between June 1949 and June 1950, 43,000 Yemenite Jews immigrated to Israel. (The remaining 2,000 Jews chose to come later.)

From the four corners of the world, Jews came home: the newly reborn State of 700,000 had absorbed 239,576 immigrants in 1949; 170,249 in 1950; 175,095 in 1951. And within four years, 686,748 *olim* had returned to their ancestral "promised land." Together, with its new generation of children, 88,338, the Israeli population had more than doubled itself. Ben-Gurion had witnessed his first dream for the State realized. The Law of Return providing that each Jew has the right to settle in Israel and claim Israeli citizenship had become implemented in reality.

The vision had become the law and the law the vision. The land was covered by tents into which 200,000 new arrivals had moved, sometimes two families in each. During the first few years, Ben-Gurion proudly explained, "the number of agricultural settlements was doubled. During the half-century before the State, fewer than 300 villages had been established, cultivating some 125,000 acres. By the end of 1951, Jews were cultivating 850,000 acres. This tremendous agricultural achievement was carried out by Jews from Yemen, Morocco, Iraq, Turkey, Tunisia, Egypt, Poland, Romania and other East European and Balkan countries. In their places of origin they had never tilled the land, but in Israel, in cooperation with pioneering youth from Britain, the United States, Canada, Argentina, South Africa and Western Europe, they established many new villages. In addition, a major building operation was set in motion - in 1949 buildings containing 33,556 rooms were built, and by 1951, the number had almost trebled."

The State treasury was empty but the biblical vision was being fulfilled.

## **REFLECTIONS XIV**

### ***The Birthpangs of the Messiah - Part II***

According to David Ben-Gurion, "the days of the Messiah are more important than the Messiah, and the Jewish people lives in the days of the Messiah, anticipates and believes in the days of the Messiah, and this is one of the major reasons for its existence."

Ben-Gurion was a practical man, yet a visionary - practical, because he understood that without vision there would have been no one who would have dreamt to settle in the Land of Israel; and without this dream there would have been no state of Israel: "the need and vision have always been intertwined in immigration in the land.... A Jew leaves diaspora out of need, and comes here out of vision."

Why is it, he would often ask rhetorically, that we remember history? It is to regain that sense of direction from our ancestors; "the eyes of all (ancient) nations were turned back towards the past, ... the eyes of our people were lifted forward, to the vision of the end of days."

Alluding to the Jews in the Soviet Union for whom he never gave up hope, Ben-Gurion wrote: "It is not two or three Great Powers that will mold the world and determine its fate, but the historic needs of all the nations. Once the distinction between the ruling and dominant and the poor and backward nations is expunged, dictatorship will not last long, the danger of war will pass, the enforced confinement of peoples and populations in totalitarian countries will cease, and the captives of Zion will return to their Homeland. And the Jewish people, which throughout its 4,000 years of existence has believed in the supremacy of the spirit and in love for the stranger and sojourner, which has shown the tremendous things of which creative human beings are capable when their steps are guided by a pioneering will and their path lit up by the Messianic vision of national and universal redemption -

that people will behold the realization of the ideals of Isaiah, and its contribution to the establishment of the new world will bring it peace, security, and the world's respect, also strengthening world peace and human brotherhood."

Ben-Gurion's image of redemption for the Jews in Israel was not insular - it was not limited in the particular to Jews only. The redemption of mankind, he believed, will be preceded by the redemption of the Jewish people, returned to their ancestral home. From Jerusalem, Zion, "will come the word of the Lord" - an era of everlasting peace; and in the words of Isaiah and Micah: "Nation will not lift up sword against nation; neither shall they learn war anymore."

The mission continues. The spirit of Ben-Gurion and the presence of the prophets accompany us as we wait on the tarmac for the Jews of the Soviet Union, Syria, Ethiopia and all those who extend their hands to be permitted to ascend and return on the wings of an eagle to Eretz Israel.

**REFLECTIONS XV**  
***A Search for Absolute Truth***  
***Einstein for President - Part I***

In human relationships, from early childhood in Plonsk, David Ben-Gurion lived by a simple test by which he subconsciously judged others: Small minds discuss people, larger minds discuss events, and great minds discuss ideas.

Ben-Gurion spoke **to** many people but conversed **with** few. He could not do otherwise. In the spirit of the timeless lesson learned on his father's and grandfather's knees, David took to heart Rabbi Tarfon's teaching in the "Ethics of the Fathers": "The day [life] is short; the task is great; the workmen [human beings] are lazy; the reward is great, and the Master is insistent."

Only in the terms of ideas did Ben-Gurion speak of people and events. All else was gossip, idleness, vanity and temporary. Only ideas saved people, made of them something, gave them purpose and worth. Nothing else mattered, nothing else interested him, for he felt it was of no consequence.

Sitting on a park bench on the treed, green grounds of Princeton, on a sunny afternoon in 1951, their wispy, white hair tossed in the wind, Ben-Gurion and Einstein not only met but encountered each other in the same philosophical space and time, to affirm together a Supreme Being, infinitely superior to all knowledge and conception, and from Whom flowed an Absolute Truth. Einstein concluded that there had to be an Absolute Truth, for without it there would be no relative truth.

Ben-Gurion and Einstein admired each other in dialogue; their thoughts, although absorbed in different tasks, were directed to an Absolute Truth from which they sought guidance towards relative truths. And at the end of 1952, a week after the State of Israel had risen from mourning Chaim

Weizmann, its first President, Ben-Gurion telephoned Abba Eban, his ambassador to the United Nations, and directed him to offer Einstein, the post of President of the State of Israel. Einstein, although deeply moved, declined. He wrote that he had "neither the natural ability nor the experience necessary to deal with human beings and to carry out official functions."

In concluding his November 18, 1952 letter of regret to Eban, Einstein expressed his personal distress with his decision "because my relationship to the Jewish people has become my strongest human bond, ever since I became fully aware of our precarious situation among the nations of the world."

On the same day that Einstein mailed his response, he received an impassioned plea to accept the post from the editor-in-chief of Maariv. Einstein replied "Your cable had a downright devastating effect upon me; but it arrived after the fact. Because of an indiscretion, I was prematurely compelled to announce my decision on the issue." He continued, "Never has humanity's age-old dream of entrusting highest sovereignty to the thinker been put to the test. Here, for the first time in known history, is the opportunity."

**REFLECTIONS XV**  
***A Search for Absolute Truth***  
***Einstein for President - Part II***

Although Einstein declined the presidency, his identification with the State of Israel and the Jewish people remained unqualified. A Jewish Homeland was essential, he felt, to the survival of the Jewish people; only as an independent sovereign nation could Israel fulfill its age-old purpose - of knowledge and morality fused in harmony.

No matter how absorbed in his work, Einstein was preoccupied with the urgent need for peaceful coexistence between Jews, the Arab countries and Israel. Having suffered calamities throughout its history, he repeatedly emphasized, as he did in a letter to Zvi Lurie, a renowned member of the Jewish Agency, on January 4, 1955, that Israel must do all in its capacity to pursue a policy of freedom, democracy and equality for the Arab population in Israel. The goal of the State of Israel, for Albert Einstein and for David Ben-Gurion, embodied security (based on culture and science) and morality intertwined.

In 1955, for Israel's seventh Independence Day, Einstein began to prepare notes for a television address he was invited to give. Suddenly stricken, while writing his address, Einstein was admitted to hospital with a terminal illness. Although he brought his notes with him, and kept them at his bedside, it was not given to him to continue. Only one page remains:

"I speak to you today not as an American citizen and not as a Jew, but as a human being who seeks with the greatest seriousness to look at things objectively. What I seek to accomplish is simply to serve with my feeble capacity truth and justice at the risk of pleasing no one.

"At issue is the conflict between Israel and Egypt. You may consider this a small and insignificant problem and may feel that there are more serious things to worry about. But this it not true. In matters concerning truth and justice there can be no distinction between big problems and small; for the general principles which determine the conduct of men are indivisible. Whoever is careless with the truth in small matters cannot be trusted in important affairs.

"This indivisibility applies not only to moral but also political problems; for little problems cannot be properly appreciated unless they are understood in their interdependence with big problems. And the big problem in our times is the division of mankind into two hostile camps: The Communist World and the so-called Free World. Since the significance of the terms Free and Communist is in this context hardly clear to me, I prefer to speak of a power conflict between East and West, the world being round, it is not clear what precisely is meant by the terms East and West.

"In essence, the conflict that exists today is no more than an old-style struggle for power, once again presented to mankind in semireligious trappings. The difference is that, this time, the development of atomic power has imbued the struggle with a ghostly character; for both parties know and admit that, should the quarrel deteriorate into actual war, mankind is doomed. Despite this knowledge, statesmen in responsible positions on both sides continue to employ the well-known technique of seeking to intimidate and demoralize the opponent by marshaling superior military strength. They do so even though such a policy entails the risk of war and doom. Not one statesman in a position of responsibility has dared to pursue the only course that holds out any promise of peace, the course of supranational security, since for a statesman to follow such a course would be tantamount to political suicide. Political passions, once they have been fanned exact their victims...."

The sentence was never completed. Albert Einstein never delivered the address. It is reproduced as a tribute to his

memory and as his legacy to the reader, to Israel and to David Ben-Gurion who never forgot his afternoon at Princeton, and the friend with whom he shared ideas.

Einstein passed away four days after he had written the passage. Although unconcluded, his idea lives.



## REFLECTIONS XVI

### *Have Dominion over All the Earth ...*

### *Replenish and Subdue It*

"And God said: 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness; and let them have *dominion ... over all the earth, ...* And God created man in his own image, in the image of God created He him; male and female created He them. And God blessed them; and God said unto them: 'Be fruitful, and multiply, and *replenish the earth, and subdue it; ...* And God said: 'Behold, I have given you ... all the earth, ... to you ... and God saw every thing that he had made, and, behold, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day."

And the life-long student of the Bible (*Reflections II*), David Ben-Gurion, a son of his people, who became the first leader of the Third Jewish Commonwealth (The first had been destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 B.C.E. and the Second by the Romans in 70 A.D.), a bridge, an interlude that spanned the centuries between 70 A.D. and 1948, believed in the words of Genesis; all of nature was give to man for him to have "dominion" over it, on condition that he "replenish the earth."

It was Ben-Gurion's dream that Israel subdue the desert, to make it bloom; and harness the power of nature - the sun, the tides, the atom - for warmth, energy, sustenance and preservation. This Ben-Gurion accepted as a challenge to Israel, for the state to serve as a showcase for the third world: "The supreme test of Israel in our generation lies not in its struggle with hostile forces without, but in success in gaining domination through science and pioneering, over the wasteland in the South and the Negev.

Who was it who could achieve such a triumph: man last in creation (for whom all was established), first in design. Ben-Gurion recognized man's unlimited possibilities: "... Nothing

other than the profound faith of man in his will power and capacity, and a burning spiritual need to transform the natural order, as well as the order of his own life, for the sake of the redeeming vision."

Ben-Gurion interpreted that vision's demand as "justice not only in the life of man, but in the whole world, in the entire cosmos." In the words of Isaiah, "Drop down ye heavens from above, and let the skies pour down righteousness, let the earth open, and let them bring forth salvation ..." (45:8). The scientists, the harnessers of the earth, for Ben-Gurion, had the sacred duty to be partners with the prophets; each of their inventions destined for the skies and the earth, was meant to echo the verse of the Psalmist: "Truth shall spring out of the earth; and righteousness shall look down from heaven." (85:10-11)

Through intuition, Ben-Gurion believed, man could perceive that "values" were integral to the "cosmos." Science without conscience exemplified for Ben-Gurion, an aberration of Genesis. For did not God say, after He completed creation, that "it was very good."

And God rested on the seventh day.

According to interpretations of Abraham Joshua Heschel, the late philosopher and Bible scholar with whom Ben-Gurion would have agreed, it was given to man to continue creation and to make of the eighth day a blessing or a curse.

In a lecture, at Brandeis University on March 9, 1960, entitled *Science and Ethics: Contribution of Greece, India and Israel*, Ben-Gurion said: "The tree of knowledge of good and evil must be planted in the soul of every man, and first of all in the soul of men of science, so that their creative activity may be a blessing to mankind."

And it is for man to choose and for God to judge the works of the eighth day as it continues...

## REFLECTIONS XVII

### *Can a Machine Compose the Book of Job?*

David Ben-Gurion to Amos Deshalit, a renowned nuclear physicist at the Weizmann Institute, on January 13, 1957. The discussion recorded in Ben-Gurion's diary preoccupied the prime minister the entire week. Deshalit had said that no difference exists between machine and man, and that a machine can be designed which fully resembles man.

Ben-Gurion responded: "I am troubled by your stand as a physicist in matters of human reason and cognition. Does specialization in the science of physics really prevent one from recognizing the spiritual powers and reason of man? Do you believe that two machines could be designed to exchange letters on matters of art, philosophy and science, such as Spinoza's treatise, or that a machine could be invented which, while traveling all over the globe, would collect facts and deduce Darwin's theory from them? Don't you realize the entirely different nature of spiritual processes, which are, of course, related to physical processes in the human body, but differ completely from mere mechanical processes? Can you conceive of a machine which would compose the book of Job, or Plato's symposium, or Einstein's theory of relativity? The perfect machine would perhaps obey the will of its designer, but there is almost no limit to man's reason and intellectual ability."

In spite of their differences in thought, Deshalit, in a letter of January 26, 1960, admitted that his scope of concerns was extended and that he had to reconsider his previously held assumptions on account of his dialogue with Ben-Gurion.

A dialogue with scientists was most important to Ben-Gurion especially after the loss of his friend Einstein (*Reflections XV, Parts I and II*), who had probed not only science but morality; and had recognized that if the two would not exist in harmony, neither would humanity.

In a speech, at the opening of the Nuclear Physics Institute on May 20, 1958, Ben-Gurion said: "Jewish thought always taught us that the spirit of man, while not bound to be observed, measured, or scaled, is no less real and mighty than the matter we can sense.

... And it is significant that the prophets of Israel have considered that moral values such as justice, mercy and truth are not only human imperatives, but an integral part of the cosmos, although the eye and other senses cannot perceive it."

Not even science, Ben-Gurion believed, could reach as far as the intuitive spirit in understanding the universe and solving its problems. For science without spirit is precision without direction, according to Ben-Gurion: Each advance made in science occurs when science is imbued with the purpose of the spirit; then, it surpasses its former known bounds towards a limitless universe of possibilities:

"Only through an intuitive understanding of man's potentialities - which we call *halutzitjut* or pioneering - have we succeeded in our enterprise in this country, which seemed completely incompatible with all accepted laws and conventional concepts..."

## **REFLECTIONS XVIII**

### **Chaim Weizmann – From Motol to Tel Nof**

#### **Palestine Not Uganda**

##### **Part I**

(Trying to imagine the thoughts of the man, I developed the following scenario:)

Clenching behind his back a fist full of sand from the Israeli soil, Chaim Weizmann inspected the honour guard at the Tel Nof Air Force Base where he had landed a few minutes ago. His first official act as president of the Provisional State Council of Israel (the precursor to the first elected parliament of the State of Israel of which he would become the first president) summoned "a whole inner world of memories and experiences," more numerous than the grains of sand held between his fingers.

It all began for him in Motol near Pinsk in 1874 as he describes in his autobiography, *Trial and Error*, where his "... house was steeped in rich Jewish tradition; and Palestine was at the center of the ritual.... The return was in the air, a vague deep-rooted Messianism, a hope which would not die." Already at the age of eleven, living in the Russian Pale of Settlement, his Anglo-centric, Anglophile vision, despite the Ottoman Empire's (Turkey's) suzerainty over Palestine, led him in a Hebrew letter to write: "For why should we look to the Kings of Europe for compassion that they should take pity upon us and give us a resting place? In vain all have denied: The Jews must die, but England will nevertheless have mercy upon us. In conclusion, to Zion! Jews to Zion let us go!"

Content to cherish the time, not to have to speak immediately while fulfilling this exercise of protocol, Weizmann allowed his mind to span not only his seventy odd years but also the history of the Jewish people. The recent

words written by U.S. Supreme Court Justice Felix Frankfurter returned to him: "Mine eyes have seen the coming glory of the Lord; happily you can now say that and can say what Moses could not."

How Weizmann wished that his son Michael, killed in 1942, in action with the Royal Air Force over the English Channel, could have witnessed the scene!

The 1906 discussion he held, by God-given chance, with Arthur James Balfour, during his period of research at Manchester University, clearly reverberated in his mind: Balfour could not understand the Zionists' rejection of the proposal to allocate land to them in Uganda. The young Weizmann, in response, explained to the British Prime Minister, in terms of a question, whether he would accept Paris rather than London. Balfour replied, "No, but London is the capital of my country." To which Weizmann responded, "Jerusalem was the capital of my country when London was a marsh." It was that answer which made Balfour understand the aspirations of the Zionist movement; and which implemented itself in the 1917 Balfour Declaration, only to be denied by successive British governments who no longer knew Balfour and had forgotten Weizmann's interpretation.

Often disappointed and disillusioned by the British, Weizmann continued to plead the case, and to place his hopes with the British government. This trust in Great Britain often alienated him from the leaders of the Yishuv and particularly Ben-Gurion; however, Weizmann's realism and pragmatism recognized there was a time and place for both diplomacy and independent action, never surrendering either.

Weizmann tirelessly repeated the words of the speech he gave to the 1907 Eighth Zionist Congress at the Hague. He had said that even if a charter which Herzl proposed, were possible, "... it would be without value unless it rested, so to say, on the very soil of Palestine, on a Jewish population rooted in that soil, on institutions established by and for that population." Britain, he believed, more often than not, even during Zionism's difficult long episodes with that

government, would eventually grant Palestine to the Jews; nevertheless, Weizmann also realized that Jews could not rely on anyone to build their land for them. This policy, which became known as "synthetic Zionism," two paths of Zionism, established the guiding tenet of his vision and won a place in the Zionist movement of which he was head from 1920-1931 and from 1935-1946.

Diplomatic historian Sir Charles Webster, in *The Art and Practice of Diplomacy*, described Weizmann's role as "The greatest act of diplomatic statesmanship of the First World War, ... not even Masaryk and Venizelos can compare in stature with Weizmann." Webster recognized, as did the Western World's statesmen, that it was through Weizmann's efforts that the Balfour Declaration (although later abrogated) was issued. This, Weizmann's foremost achievement, was a pivotal point in modern Jewish history. Jewish political nationhood had crossed the threshold of imagination and dreams into the world of politics.

And, in 1947, despite ill health, in his speech to the General Assembly of the United Nations, he continued to appeal for the potential State which he always believed would be brought into reality. On November 29, 1947, the United Nations voted the partition plan, thus the creation of the State of Israel, recognized by International Law; and on May 14, 1948 when Palestinian Jewry proclaimed its statehood, President Truman, in a direct response to a letter from Weizmann whom he had grown to respect and admire as the representative of the potential State, authorized the recognition of Israel by the United States despite the reservations of members of his administration.

The inspection of the honour guard completed, the grains of sand slipping through his fingers, it was now time for Weizmann to speak to the State — his memories had brought him to this moment.

## **REFLECTIONS XVIII**

### **Chaim Weizmann - From Motol to Tel Nof**

#### **Palestine Not Uganda**

#### **Part II**

Softly singing a psalm, he readied himself, "I am going on a very, very long journey. Prepare everything." Chaim Weizmann said to his wife, Vera, a day before he died.

Earlier, when the renowned scientist and first president of Israel became seriously ill, he summoned Meyer Weisgal, his confidant and the devoted implementer of his scientific-humanitarian ideas at the Weizmann Institute in Rehovat, and shared his frustrations and concerns:

"You see the Jews are ... a people of genius and, at the same time, a people of enormous stupidity. With their obstinacy they will drive through a wall, but the breach in the wall ... always remains gaping at you. Those who strive consciously to reach the mountain top remain at the bottom of the hill.... Those who set out to achieve something specific in science, never achieve it. But those who work *Lismoh* (for its own sake) usually reach the top of the mountain."

As a child, Weizmann had studied the passage from the Talmud in *The Ethics of the Fathers*, where it is stated, "Antigonus of Sokho received the oral tradition from Simeon the Just. He used to say: Be not like servants who serve the master for the sake of receiving a reward, but be like servants who serve the master without expectation of receiving a reward; and let the fear of Heaven be upon you." Science and ethics had always been harmonized in his being. For years he had combined research in science and work for his people. Even Ben-Gurion, who often opposed Weizmann, publicly acknowledged, a few months earlier, the integration of Weizmann's being: "I have always suspected, and still do that Dr. Weizmann's scientific work is not entirely disengaged



from his Zionist goals and activities. I trust the Zionist motive of Dr. Weizmann did not discredit and did not harm the supreme quality of his scientific work, and I know, it was, and will be, a great blessing to the Zionist endeavour."

Although Ben-Gurion had always thought of the senior partner in the Zionist cause as "the best of the bourgeoisie" and the finest diplomat for the cause of Israel, winning Ben-Gurion's approval of his presidency, Ben-Gurion did not grant him any more than the formal ceremonial duties which protocol demanded.

In his first year as president, Weizmann expressed his sentiments: Ben Gurion as Prime Minister and Minister of Defense has proved a great success. Whether he will be the same success in peace time, I am not prepared to say; he reminds me somewhat of Winston who is good in war and less so in peace. However, it is too early to draw any conclusions. He is thoughtful, calm, resolute and a man of courage."

As he expressed his final thought to Weisgal, Weizmann said: "Ben-Gurion did something I could never have done, no matter what the circumstances. He sent Jewish boys and girls to the front to die for the State of Israel. It was probably necessary and history will accord him his place for this...."

Weizmann and Ben-Gurion, each a statesman in his own right, each believed in the State of Israel, its survival, security and the basis of righteousness on which it would have to build. Although their means may have been different, their ends were exactly the same; and this, they recognized in each other, not allowing personal differences to subtract from the contribution each had made to the State.

Weizmann was a realistic idealist, a paradox in itself which he once explained: "This is not an age of humanists, but speaking for myself, I still believe that there is boundless wisdom in Goethe's dictum that if you want to change the hearts of men, treat them as though they were already what you want them to become."

From his sick-bed on the fourth anniversary of the establishment of the State, he wanted to make sure Israel was prepared for everything: "On this solemn day I would say this to all my brethren: The future of Israel rests on three foundations — brotherly love, constructive effort and peace near and far."

## **REFLECTIONS XIX**

### ***The State and Literature - Part I***

Can the world of the politician and the world of the writer meet? Do they represent the same world, or worlds – perspectives of thought? Can one add to the other's understanding of the past and present so that a vision and potential for the future, enunciated by the writer, or symbiotically by both, can be implemented by the politician?

Less than a year after the creation of Eretz Israel, in March of 1949, David Ben-Gurion invited thirty-five writers to his Prime Minister's Office. It was time, he felt, to initiate the dialogue for "the incorporation of writers and intellectuals into the formation of national character in the State of Israel." Ben-Gurion assured his scribe-witnesses that in spite of external dangers which lead to internal safeguards, "nobody would conquer or enslave the human spirit."

Proposals were put forward by both sides to institutionalize the writers into the framework of the State. Eventually a bureaucracy was formed with an appointment of dignitaries to committees, granting awards and travel funds. Proposals, some accepted, others rejected, ranged from a distinct separation to a close association between the state and its writers. Eliezer Steinman spoke of a "Sanhedrin" of intellectuals whereby writers would keep themselves removed from government influence; and yet derive recognition from a body whose authority, in matters of spiritual and moral life, emanates not from state-titles but from an acknowledgement of the people. What occurred in Israel, as in any marriage with an intellectual elite, were moments of bliss, separation and reconciliation. This dialogue between the Government of Israel and representatives of the "free republic of Jewish spirit, literature and science" demonstrated the relatively calm, literary honeymoon (in a turbulent external world), Ben-Gurion enjoyed for about a decade.

An acrimonious verbal storm arose which shattered the gentle Ben-Gurion-writer relationship. Volleys of word-mines were hurled by both parties. (As writers are known to be like everyone else, only, perhaps, more so, they verbalize and engrave their reflections — detail after detail — proustian thought after proustian thought: one writer picks up where another left off, attempting to make sure that nothing remains unwritten, for as much of the "truth," as possible, to be uttered, if it was witnessed. How much was witnessed and thus recorded, and the clarity of the perception, is another matter. As Haim Hazaz demonstrates in his famous short story, "The Sermon," not only acumen but boldness is necessary on the part of the speaker or the writer; and patience and concentration is needed on the part of the listener or reader. A story, to be told, must have two such parties.)

The initial cause of the literary sallies originated with Ben-Gurion's response to what his feelings were regarding fine literature. "Fine literature?" he replied, "I have not read fine literature for several years now." "... No, really, a few days ago someone wrote that I do not read Hebrew short stories. The truth is that I do not read stories at all." He was then asked whether it was for a lack of time or a lack of interest. "Both," he answered.

The novelist Moshe Shamir was the first to comment in a public letter, in the September 30, 1960 issue of *Ma'ariv*: He stated that just as Ben-Gurion's devotion to the Bible is a blessing, his disregard of contemporary Hebrew literature is a disaster. Strong words, thought Hanoach Bartov, a young writer. An enlightened ruler, wrote Bartov, is a blessing to himself and to his country, but there is no connection whatsoever between the preferences of the ruler and the "way of the spirit." In other words, Ben-Gurion does not read short stories; so who cares! He reads the Bible, philosophy. For Bartov, the writer does not need the Prime Minister's approval to write a book. He considered Shamir's concern a provocation to astonishment and pity.

Ben-Gurion then leaked a letter that Shamir had sent him half a year earlier in which the latter stated: His writing was inspired by his knowledge that Ben-Gurion might read it. The writing establishment was hurt. The poet, Shin Shalom, in *Moznaytm*, a periodical published by the writers' association, expressed that hurt: The rulers had not fulfilled their part of the deal. It is the way of the ruler not to share power. Committed poetry had granted them power and as they reached the throne they betrayed those who lifted them to it.

Was this debate folly? Was it reason? Or, was it somewhere in between?

## **REFLECTIONS XIX**

### ***The State and Literature - Part II***

Were the literary attacks justified? Did Ben-Gurion's daily readings of the Bible and philosophy not qualify as "fine literature", if in fact, he had to qualify it? Writer, Nathan Alterman, perhaps, displayed the most significant maturity on the matter when, in *Al Hamishmar*, in October, 1960, he asked: "Should Ben-Gurion . . . declare he loves poetry and thus open the new golden age?" Alterman criticized Shalom on a universal scale: "The true writer is the first to inquire around whom the world revolves, but the last to answer: 'around me.'" For Alterman, therein lies the response to the questions at the beginning of Part I of this article.

The world of the politician and the world of the writer can meet; if the politician embraces the world beyond his state (which Alterman believed Ben-Gurion did in his vision of Israel in the world), he becomes a statesman. Alterman's statement can also be interpreted to mean that writers can be as egocentric about their aesthetic and intellectual possessions as politicians are of their power. A politician can be a statesman; and a writer can be a universal witness (scribe, reflector and originator) of his society, if each, respectively, or together, is able to perceive of the world as not revolving around himself — wherein the statesman does not see all evolving from his decisions and implementation, thus power — and the writer does not think that he represents the only "truth." He may represent one element of the truth but not "the truth." When both the statesman and the writer understand that they do not possess a monopoly on truth, then, the one sees beyond his state in the community of nations; and the other sees his writing as one more testimony of mankind which tells but one more tale and, perhaps, speaks of one more aspiration.

This, however, would be too simplistic. A paradox exists as explained by the writer, S. Yizhar, in *Davar* of October 3, 1976: "The statesman chooses between the 'either' and the 'or'. He eliminates one, and the other is automatically eliminated too and turns from a choice into a decision. Yet the philosopher (or the writer) lives in a tension between the 'either' and the 'or.' . . . Where the statesman's mind comes to rest, and he relaxes, the intellectual's begins to storm."

An editorial, in *Al Hamishmar* of October 21, 1960, alluded to the remark that had caused the fury; and cryptically asked whether anybody knew what President Eisenhower felt about the American Literary Heritage, what General de Gaulle thought about the French novel, or whether Mr. Macmillan loved poems by Byron and Keats.

Ben-Gurion's response to the writers demonstrated a different view of what literature is, and how far it extends. It appears in a letter to Moshe Shamir which he had written six months prior to his initial, furor-causing statement: "I know it is dangerous to make such a heretical statement to a devoted writer, but perhaps you too would admit that life — when it is rich and meaningful — is more important than the books attempting to reflect it. . . . The great and loud song I hear — is the song of our young men of might and feat. They create our great new literature — on the mountains and in the valleys, in the workshop and factory, in the air and on the sea, in the laboratory and in the university, in the army barracks and in the police (yes, in the police, too), and I have no doubt that this "living literature" would receive its appropriate expression in stories, poems and plays. The writers who will create (or perhaps have already created) this work of art are perhaps already walking among us, but whether they do or not, this is not going to diminish the greatness of the generation, the period and the days. The epic by Aeschylus was also not written during the hero's lifetime. Let the great deeds be done — the books will be written, and if they are late to arrive, I shall not be bored in the meantime."

Samuel Joseph Agnon, the Israeli Nobel Prize Winner for Literature, believed, in this vein, that Ben-Gurion had created his own literature. In the foreword to the *Days of David Ben-Gurion*, he wrote:

"Last year, when visiting Mr. David Ben-Gurion on his 80th birthday, I presented him one of my books bearing the following inscription:

"'To David Ben-Gurion, who was chosen by the Almighty to establish the State of Israel.' The sanctity of a Jewish State lay deep in the hearts of many of us. But, examining my inner feelings, were I told: 'Let us establish it!' I would answer: 'By all means, let us do it!' but were I told: 'Let us do it now!' In all honesty, I would answer: 'Let us wait for another 20 years!' Ben-Gurion waited not, but did it with God's blessing, as if precipitating the hour destined by the Creator for the revival of the State of Israel. Many generations gave their lives for this sacred goal, but it was he who knew how to choose the time and concentrated the tremendous efforts to achieve such a historic and enormous task. What was written in the Bible about another David, King David of the Psalms: 'And David was successful in all his doing and God was with him' — was fulfilled in David Ben-Gurion.

"Vision, action, tenacity, dedication and courage combined together in one man to bring about the miracle of the rebirth of Israel.

"Many more things are left to generations to come, to be said and admired."



## **REFLECTIONS XX**

### ***A Centennial Year Draws to a Close - A New Beginning Dawns on Israel***

#### ***Part I***

A year has elapsed in celebrating the life of David Ben-Gurion and the legacy he has left.

In this year, the 100th anniversary of his birth, what remains with me, after a year of articles I have written, are not only reflections but also impressions. Some of which I would like to review with you as they are of lasting and particular significance to Israel, to Jews and to each community in which we live at this specific time in our history.

Modern Israel is still at the dawn of its existence and the ancient people that we are, and the ancient land from which we originate, were bridged in large measure by David Ben-Gurion and his entourage which I have described.

Chapters are being written each day in which every one of our lives is inscribed whether we are active or passive, leading to the strengthening of the State or its weakening. With the following words, I continue my impressions and do not conclude so that we continue always reflecting together on a strong and ethical State.

No commentary on Ben-Gurion's thought, direction and outlook is as powerful as his own words which will leave us all with reflections once we have internalized them. In this last article divided into two parts, I reiterate previous excerpts which exemplify the spirit of Ben-Gurion and of those who influenced him. They captivate the imagination to action:

In conversation with an interviewer shortly before his death, Ben-Gurion said: "First, never forget that historically

this country belongs to two races. . . . Second, remember the Arabs drastically outbreed us, and to ensure survival, a Jewish state must at all times maintain within her own borders an unassailable Jewish majority. (In 1949, when Yigal Allon pleaded with him to allow the army to capture the West Bank, Ben-Gurion replied, "If Israel took over the West Bank, what would it do with all the Arabs? If it made them Israeli citizens, Israel would no longer be a Jewish state. If it denied them citizenship, it would no longer be a democratic state. And if it chased them out, it would no longer be a civilized state.") Third, the logic of all this is that to get peace, we must return in principle to the pre-1967 borders. . . . ("In principle" meant the exception of the entire city of Jerusalem and the Golan Heights, which he specified, respectively, to those who led him across the Temple Mount to the Western Wall, immediately after the Old City's capture, and to Yitshak Navon, after he had arranged for Ben-Gurion to be flown by helicopter above the Heights.) Peace is more important than real estate. Militarily defensible borders, while desirable, cannot by themselves guarantee our future. . . . Real peace with our neighbours, mutual respect and even affection – that is our only true security. Then together we could turn the Middle East into a second Garden of Eden and one of the great creative centers of the Earth."

. . .

"To David Ben-Gurion – at your orders he fought, and at your orders he fell; may your name be blessed." As he read the dedication from a parent of a soldier who fell, Ben-Gurion, a man not given to expressing his emotions, covered his face with his hands and in the solitude of the moment looked back and thought.

On this August, 1948 evening, Moshe Gurari, a colleague, discovered the Prime Minister in his office where he had taken refuge from a reception for visiting Zionist leaders. Ben-Gurion found the mood of celebration at the reception unbearable. He was speaking, and yet wasn't speaking, to the

intruder. It was as if Ben-Gurion was in the room alone, or, perhaps, surrounded by shadows.

"You know, sometimes I attend soldiers' funerals or take part in meetings of bereaved parents, and I always wonder: no one has yet insulted me, no one has tried, in his grief, to throw a stone at me. No one has shouted at me and called through his pain: 'You wanted a Jewish state and we are paying the price for it; we have lost our sons!'"

Ben-Gurion continually pleaded with, and tried to justify to, himself the death of all those sons. After the United Nations' 1947 Resolution, calling for steps to be taken for the establishment of a State, Israel was invaded; the Jerusalem population was attacked. "Our neighbours declared themselves our enemies and invited us to plunge into the sea to abandon even that bit of land the whole world recognized as our own. And they set out to conquer us. . . ."

. . .

"It is our duty to tell the powers of the world without exception, with all the political humility of a small people and all the moral strength of a son of the Jewish people: the Jewish people in its Land will not be like sheep led to the slaughter. . . . What Hitler did to six million helpless Jews in the ghettos of Europe, no persecuter will do . . . . in their homeland.

. . .

## **REFLECTIONS XX**

### ***A Centennial Year Draws to a Close - A New Beginning Dawns on Israel Part II***

On his return to the Knesset, having lived in the solitary barrenness of sand where the horizon meets the land, as if in a neverending expanse of space and time, Ben-Gurion pronounced the following words:

I cannot say that this year I learned new things...  
but it seems to me I saw things more clearly than it is  
perhaps possible from the confines of an office. And  
I shall tell you briefly what I saw:  
Too much desert and wasteland  
    and too little settlement and development;  
Too much concentration and crowding in the towns...  
    and too little population on the borders;  
Too many debates and servants  
    and too few productive workers;  
Too much pursuit of comfort, luxury and riches  
    and too little productivity and pioneering  
    initiative;  
Too many splits and quarrels  
    and too little joint effort and overall  
    responsibility;  
Too many phrases about Jewish unity and brother-  
    hood  
    and too little real help to the newcomers;  
Too many demands from the State  
    and too few demands of ourselves;  
Too many requests for rights  
    and too little fulfilment of responsibility.

...

*The truly righteous do not  
complain about wickedness  
but add righteousness;  
do not complain about heresy  
but add faith;  
do not complain about ignorance  
but add wisdom.*

In his apodictic poem, Rav Abraham Yltzhak Hacohen Kook, Eretz Israel's first Ashkenazi chief rabbi, who died 51 years ago, actually personified himself.

This man of *shalom bayit* attempted to make peace in the house of Israel by what he believed was the essence of Judaism. His program called for renewing the old and hallowing the new.

The labour Zionist philosophy of Berl Katzenelson, David Ben-Gurion's friend and mentor, and that of A.D. Gordon, intermingle and are swept into the pre-state of Israel landscape with the religious Zionist theology of Rav Kook.

...

The establishment of the State of Israel, was it the fulfillment of the aim of Zionism? According to David Ben-Gurion, it was.

In the late 1950's and 60's, a debate, although passionate, nevertheless based on mutual respect and admiration, raged between the philosopher-theologian, Martin Buber (who immigrated to Palestine in 1938 from Nazi Germany) and the philosopher-statesman, David Ben-Gurion. Zionism, Buber proclaimed, is not only a goal but a means. "... true Zionism is like 'the City of the great King' (*Isaiah 6:5*). . . . A living and enduring thing" (*Israel and the World*). It does not happen, it must be strived for continually. A true Zionist never becomes satisfied with being, but perpetually longs to becoming, more and more, righteous - more worthy to be a light amongst the nations. Zionism, to Buber, is a dialogical process, in constant action, forever in motion, never static. Buber held

that the independence and establishment of the State of Israel is a condition of Zionism, but not its fulfillment."

The reason, "God chose Israel," Buber states in his essay *Hebrew Humanism*, was not merely to elect but to demand: "... a truth and righteousness and He does not demand for certain isolated spheres of life, but for the whole life of man, for the whole life of the people. . . ."

In an open letter to Mahatma Gandhi in 1939, describing the diabolical persecution of the Jews by the Nazis and the essence of Zionism, Buber explained that "what is decisive for us is not the promise of the Land, but the demand, whose fulfillment is bound up with the Land."

"Zion," Buber wrote to a critic, "signifies to me no divine security but a God-given chance."

...

Ben-Gurion always counted himself an optimist: "The Jews have always been optimists. They have had little to make them so during a long and careworn history. . . . That the victims of Auschwitz could say: 'Next year in Jerusalem.' seems at first grasp almost outrageous in its brightness when the individual must despair. But then one sees the nobility of a statement that denies the enemy his victory while offering unshakeable faith in one's own. . . ."

At the age of eighty-four, in 1970, Ben-Gurion wrote to his childhood confidante, "There is hope, dear Rachel, that peace is approaching, not quickly, but slowly, slowly, and . . . it appears to me that by the end of this century the prophecy of Isaiah will be fulfilled."

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