

STRIFE - AND STRIVING

By Anita Shapira Haaretz 01 04 2005

Tevet's biography is a biography of love. What saves it from becoming a hagiography, devoid of criticism, is that he is happy to reveal his protagonist's weaknesses. He portrays Ben-Gurionwarts and all, and lets the reader decide whether his evaluation is correct or the facts indicate otherwise

"Kinat David: Ish Riv" by Shabtai Tevet, ("David Ben-Gurion: Man of Strife"), Vol.4, Schocken Books, 1062 pages, NIS 190

In 1926, David Ben-Gurion had a nightmare. "I was alone with [Aaron] Eisenberg of Rehovot in a big car harnessed to a lion. The lion was the size of a horse, but it was blind. Eisenberg was driving and the lion obeyed him. When I tried to drive, the car skidded this way and that. All of a sudden, I found myself outside the car, but nearby, and the lion lunged at me. I screamed at Eisenberg with all my might to move the car, but he didn't hear. It was a very narrow escape. I opened my eyes, fell back asleep, and dreamed the whole sequence over again, several more times."

Shabtai Tevet writes that psychologists came up with several interpretations for this dream. But they all agreed that Aaron Eisenberg (who helped found Jewish settlements in the pre-state period) and the lion symbolize Chaim Weizmann, then president of the World Zionist Organization (WZO). So Ben-Gurion was already dreaming of challenging Weizmann in 1926, and aware of the dangers involved. Well, maybe the part about the lion makes sense, but what does Eisenberg have to do with anything? Moreover, Ben-Gurion was so far beneath Weizmann at that time in rank and importance it seems hard to believe that in his subconscious he already saw him as a rival. But then, who are we to argue with dreams?

Ben-Gurion's dream is a parable for the main story that unfolds in the fourth volume of Tevet's monumental biography. This volume covers the period from May 1942, when the Zionist movement met at the Biltmore Hotel in New York and resolved to establish a "Jewish commonwealth," to February 1947, when the British asked the United Nations to intervene in the matter of Palestine.

Among the biographies of persons who shaped the face of the 20th century, Tevet's study of Ben-Gurion stands out as one of the most sweeping and ambitious. Tevet describes family and private life, politics and philosophy, international disputes and party squabbles. He weaves an intricate and colorful tapestry that brings together the man and his times, the general and the personal, the ordinary and the idiosyncratic. The story spans 60 years, and we still haven't reached the most important stages of Ben-Gurion's life.

Ben-Gurion claimed that his immigration to Palestine in 1906, his launching of a defense industry development fund, and the founding of the state were the three major benchmarks in his life. In the official chronicles of the Jewish people, he is remembered as the secretary of the General Federation of Hebrew Workers, the chairman of the Jewish Agency Executive, the prime minister of Israel and the minister of defense. He has gone down in history as the founding father of the State of Israel, who stood at the helm during the War of Independence, the country's most difficult war, and filled it with masses of immigrants - survivors of the Holocaust, Jews from Islamic countries and more.

The combination of social, ideological, political and military leadership that characterized Ben-Gurion was a unique feature of those who led the great revolutions of the 20th century. They believed that it was their right to reshape human beings, peoples and the

map of the world, and had no qualms about taking upon themselves the fate of entire nations. While Tevet doesn't like the comparison between Ben-Gurion and Lenin, there is something about the austere, authoritarian character of the Bolshevik leader, the symbol of willpower and initiative, that reminds us of Ben-Gurion.

But let's not get carried away. However much they resembled one another in steely determination and the ability to recognize a historic opportunity when it crossed their paths, Ben-Gurion was no Lenin. There was a considerable difference in the extent to which they were prepared to sacrifice others on the altar of their goals. On top of that, the framework in which Ben-Gurion operated was a kind of braking system that set limits on what was permissible and what was not.

Compared to Martin Gilbert's multi-volume, minutely detailed biography of Churchill, Tevet's biography of Ben-Gurion is not inordinately long. On the contrary, considering that Ben-Gurion held more positions and was on center stage for a longer time than Churchill.

The only complaint readers might have is that they are anxious to get to the end of the story. Tevet has undertaken a historical quest of tremendous importance. For years to come, these volumes will serve as a wellspring of information for writers of research papers and monographs, as well as laymen interested in learning more about life in Ben-Gurion's day. Every page is a testament to Tevet's pedantic scholarship. The depth of his research is truly astonishing: When and where did Weizmann and Ben-Gurion - each of them separately, of course - meet with American presidents, British foreign ministers and Soviet delegates? When were they turned away? Who was elected to the Zionist Executive, and what kind of power balance was there in the Zionist Congress? Who was a right-hand man to whom? What books did Ben-Gurion purchase and when? Details upon details that could be the basis not for one, but many, books.

Ben-Gurion's place in Jewish and Israeli history is assured. Not so his standing in the eyes of historians. Their attitude changes from time to time in keeping with the political winds blowing in the halls of academe. Since the 1970s, Ben-Gurion has ceased to be a source of political controversy between left and right, left and far-left, the old guard and the younger generation - a controversy that cast a pall over his accomplishments in the early years of the state.

On the other hand, being worshipped by the right, and dubbed its founding father when the right came to power, has turned him into a symbol of the Israeli establishment. For anyone who has gripes against the establishment, Ben-Gurion has become the punching bag. Mass immigration and the flaws of the "melting pot" approach are his fault. He is to blame for the expulsion of the Arabs and the military administration. The "anti-Diaspora" attitude of young politicians in his day, the failure to rescue European Jewry during the Holocaust, the alienation of the survivors - all the shortcomings of Israeli society are pinned on him, as if he were "Srulik," Dosh's cartoon character, who has turned overnight from a young Sabra into an old man, losing his innocence without gaining the wisdom of maturity. This was the widespread approach in the 1980s and 1990s. Today, it seems, our hearts have opened and we are willing to take a more balanced view of the man and his work.

Tevet's biography is a biography of love. But what saves it from becoming a hagiography, devoid of criticism, is that he is more than happy to reveal his protagonist's weaknesses. He portrays Ben-Gurion warts and all, and lets the reader decide whether his evaluation is correct or the facts indicate otherwise. Two personality traits stand out in high relief. One

of them was Ben-Gurion's pugnaciousness. "Man of Strife" is the subtitle Tevet gives to this volume, although it could apply to his life as a whole.

A good fight can either bring out the best in people, or the worst. In Ben-Gurion's case, it brought out the best. He was like an old war horse, excited at the scent of battle. He did not always distinguish between a worthy opponent and a 90-pound wimp; sometimes he would draw his sword at paper tigers, especially in internal politics. But when he did encounter a feisty opponent, there was no one who enjoyed the fight more. Several of them make their appearance in this book: Yitzhak Tabenkin, Chaim Weizmann and Abba Hillel Silver. In the second row, somewhat reluctant to confront the blows were Moshe Sharett, Yosef Sprinzak and Nahum Goldmann.

Ben-Gurion was at his best as a speaker and a master of polemic in his "Response to the British High Commissioner," a magnum opus of Zionist rhetoric. His fire and brimstone speeches within the party and without created the image of a man of brinkmanship and passion, a demagogue with the power to stir up the masses. Reading this book, one begins to suspect that Ben-Gurion deliberately cultivated this image of a madman who must be stopped before he does something irresponsible.

Tevet portrays him as a leader who knew exactly where he was heading. Yet he would tug the rope at both ends. He would infuriate the moderates and the activists to the point where neither believed him, searching for some crack in the wall of history through which he could pave the way for a Jewish state. Ben-Gurion's image as a fearless man ready to stand up to the British, who regarded him as their born enemy, contrasted sharply with his constant search for dialogue - a policy he clung to right up until the last minute, when Bevin decided to drop the hot potato called Palestine into the lap of the United Nations.

The bulk of this volume is devoted to the great clash between Ben-Gurion and Chaim Weizmann. Weizmann, the leader who brought the Zionists the Balfour Declaration, who won the heart of the Jewish masses with his good looks, regal bearing and aristocratic manners, was the most accomplished diplomat the Zionist movement ever produced. His tremendous personal charm worked its magic on British leaders like Churchill and Lloyd George. The doors of the British prime minister, the minister in charge of the colonial office and the foreign office were open to him. American presidents, global Jewish leaders - all were mesmerized by him.

There is no question that Weizmann was an irreplaceable asset for the Zionist movement. Without a party or any other public body behind him, he retained his unchallenged position in the Zionist movement for decades, solely on the strength of his personality and esteem shared by one and all for the political connections he had developed. He had the rare ability to listen to his conversation partners and persuade them to take action that was pro-Zionist but also within their own interest. He was at his best in direct face-to-face encounters, where he could use his charisma to maximum effect.

Weizmann's shortcomings were already evident in the 1930s: He was easily carried away and prone to sweeping declarations that the Zionist movement could not stand behind. The need to "keep an eye" on Weizmann and make sure he didn't do anything stupid was one of the unspoken conventions of the Labor party.

In the other corner, facing this refined and hugely charismatic man, was Ben-Gurion, who was exactly the opposite - a man lacking charm, with no special diplomatic skills. Ben-Gurion was not a master of persuasion, especially in matters that had nothing to do with the party. Instead of charm and persuasiveness, he was a doer with an endless store of energy. He knew how to mobilize political power and put it to use - in the Yishuv (pre-

state Jewish community), among the survivors, in the American Jewish community. His forte was not the British arena, where Weizmann could win him hands down.

After 1939, however, the status of Great Britain began a slow but steady decline. Ben-Gurion realized that it was "changing of the guard" time. The United States was replacing Britain as the leader of the free world. According to Tevet, Ben-Gurion did not share a common language with Abba Hillel Silver, who roused the Jews of America into their first serious battle for Zionism. But Silver bypassed Weizmann's supporters to create a new style of activism in the American Jewish community based on principles that were close to Ben-Gurion's heart, i.e., appealing to the masses and using them to put pressure on the government.

The clashes between Ben-Gurion, the enterprising, energetic rising star, and Weizmann, the aging, ailing leader who lost a son in the war and whose major backer, Britain, betrayed its alliance with the Zionists, reflect the changing of the guard in the Zionist movement. Sometimes there are things that are hard to understand. Why did Ben-Gurion step up his battle against Weizmann in 1943, when the war was still raging and it was doubtful that any issue could be fully resolved?

Berl Katzenelson was probably right to rap Ben-Gurion on the knuckles. "All of Zionism is about to go to hell," said Katzenelson. "As important as the Weizmann problem is, we have more critical problems right now, such as the loss of European Jewry. What could be more anti-Zionist than that?" Ben-Gurion obviously felt his fight against Weizmann was justified because he had to prepare for the future. But Ben-Gurion's timing and priorities are sometimes puzzling.

In the manner of great leaders, whose urge to lead is a basic component of their personalities, Ben-Gurion always saw the good of the nation as synonymous with his own good. As far as he was concerned, his urge to lead was also in the best interests of the Zionist movement. He regarded every position he held as the most important for the Jewish people and Zionism. He felt this way when he was secretary of the Histadrut, and also when he was chairman of the Jewish Agency, prime minister and defense minister.

Ben-Gurion was prone to "volcanic eruptions" that required his friends to intervene and hold him back from behaving irresponsibly. One such eruption was in 1930, when he warned Britain "to watch out," and threatened to destroy the British Empire when "perfidious Albion" betrayed the Jewish Yishuv. In 1939, he climbed the "Zionists as soldiers" tree and had to be helped down by his friends. When the war was over, he pushed for an armed struggle to force the issue of "illegal" immigration, but again his friends came to the rescue. These outbursts reflected the deep frustration felt by a man of action whose ability to act was ultimately limited. For with all the helpless fury of the Jewish people after the Holocaust, what could the Zionist movement do when the British refused to abolish the White Paper, as Weizmann and Ben-Gurion had hoped?

Weizmann once said that he always went to meetings with the British High Commissioner with clenched fists. If he opened them, the High Commissioner would see that they were empty. This anecdote came back to me as I read Tevet's account of 1945. What could the Zionist movement do to get the British to change their minds? The Jewish resistance movement in Palestine was born out of Ben-Gurion's sense of despair. In the end, it was the Anglo-American Committee's proposal to bring to Palestine 100,000 Holocaust survivors sitting in displaced persons camps in Germany that set the ball rolling and grabbed the attention of global, and especially American, public opinion. At first Ben-

Gurion did not see the potential in this proposal. He considered it a disaster. Only later did he adopt this approach as a basic component of Zionist policy.

Reading about these tumultuous years, one begins to wonder how much of what was done was pre-planned and how much was opportunistic, taking advantage of doors that opened for a fleeting second in the course of a daily struggle. The final goal - a Jewish state - never changed, of course, but the road to it changed every day. Ben-Gurion was in a great hurry. He pushed for immediate decisions on the assumption - correct, of course - that time was working against Zionism. Weizmann and his supporters were prepared to accept temporary solutions, a slower pace. In the end, God hardened Bevin's heart. He refused any kind of compromise. But if Bevin had agreed to the immigration of 100,000 refugees over a two-year period, if he had agreed to cancel the White Paper and restore the Mandatory status quo, would Ben-Gurion have said no? According to Tevet, apparently not. The fear of a UN decision was very great. A year and a half before the Jewish state was born, no one had any inkling of when it might happen.

Ben-Gurion's greatness in these years was at home. On the diplomatic front, in terms of both Britain and the United States, he was a minor player, a virtual unknown until the end of 1946. But on his home turf, he was able to put his finger on all the Archimedes' points. For starters, his recognition that the "surviving remnant" in the camps in Germany was a Zionist weapon of the first degree was a stroke of genius. Secondly, his belief in the importance of developing a defense industry was unusually prescient. The foundation he established in the United States to raise money and create the infrastructure needed to purchase U.S. army surplus sold as scrap after the war, forming the basis of Israel's military industry, was vital for Israel's victory in the War of Independence and subsequent military campaigns.

Finally, although Ben-Gurion did not know when a state would be founded, he realized at the end of 1946 that the struggle against the British would have to stop so that military power could be built up to fight the Arabs. In this respect, he demonstrated more foresight than the activists and the moderates combined.

One of the subjects dearest to Tevet's heart is Ben-Gurion's attitude toward the Holocaust, the survivors and the Yiddish language. Most of the attacks on Ben-Gurion in recent years have revolved around these issues. Although Tevet has not convinced me that Ben-Gurion predicted the Holocaust in 1934, I agree that his unfortunate remark about the rescue of the Jewish children of Germany ("better half of them in Palestine than all of them in England") was taken out of context and very much overplayed. Tevet writes at length about the rescue efforts and Eden's cynical refusal to bomb Auschwitz. His account of Ben-Gurion's visit to Bulgaria and the DP camps in Germany shows the extent to which the portrayal of Ben-Gurion as a cold and unfeeling man is a stereotype and not based on his authentic encounter with Holocaust survivors.

Ben-Gurion's attitude toward Yiddish is also analyzed. Throughout his life he was indeed a zealous promoter of Hebrew. But it turns out that he always counted in Yiddish. Most of his letters to his wife, Paula, were in Yiddish. His remarks at Mapai party conventions were sprinkled with Yiddish. His election campaign in Poland in 1933 was conducted in Yiddish, and his speeches at the DP camps were in Yiddish. His remarks to a woman who spoke in Yiddish at a workers' federation convention in February 1945 - he accused her of speaking a "foreign language," or according to another version, of "speaking the language of the dead" - caused a great outcry. The Yiddishists didn't like the first version, and the rest of the audience didn't like the second. Over the years, this story has assumed mythic

proportions. It is trotted out as proof of the vicious anti-Yiddish war raging in the country in those days. Ben-Gurion didn't think what he said was important. He agreed to have his remarks recorded in the protocol as "a slip of the tongue" - which goes to show that he wasn't such a fanatic after all.

In one chapter of the book, Tevet writes about Amos Ben-Gurion's marriage to Mary, an Irish woman who later converted. He doesn't mention the apocryphal story about this marriage that was very popular at the time: Amos comes to his father and says "Dad, I have a wonderful girl I want to marry, but she's not one of ours." To which Ben-Gurion replies: Don't worry. Hashomer Hatzair has nice girls, too." That says something about the "man of strife." Clearly he could block that side of his personality if he wanted to.

Prof. Anita Shapira has written biographies of Berl Katzenelson and Yigal Allon.