



## **Teddy Kollek**

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## Teddy Kollek

*For Teddy Kollek* ([Jerusalem, 1981]: the Jerusalem Foundation), 7 unnumbered pp.



*Teddy Kollek (1911–2007)*

THE JEWISH PEOPLE is rich in men and women of distinction both in the past and in the present. We count amongst us a remarkably high number of outstanding scientists, imaginative writers, lawyers, scholars, philosophers, religious teachers, politicians, captains of industry – public personalities of every kind – of whom

we justly can be exceedingly proud. Yet if a poll of the world Jewish community were taken about the best-loved and most greatly admired son of our people alive today, none of these, even of the great Nobel Prize winners of our time, would, one suspects, gain the first place in these stakes. Dogmatic as this may seem, it can be said with some confidence that the choice would in fact fall on the Mayor of Jerusalem, Teddy Kollek, the most famous mayor, and, indeed, one of the best-known and most beloved human beings, in the world today.

**[2]** Those who have been in public life for any length of time tend to lose some of their initial humanity; they often succeed in the somewhat ruthless world of political life only at the price of letting their feelings petrify, of hardening their hearts, of developing what is called realism. When someone tells you that he is a realist, this often means that he or she is about to tell a lie or perform some cruel or shabby act: this, as everyone knows, is true of some of the most effective men of action at all times. Teddy Kollek is exceedingly effective; yet psychologically and morally he is the very opposite of this. He entered public life soon after he left his beautiful kibbutz of Ein Gev to work for the defense of the Yishuv, almost forty years ago.<sup>1</sup> He has remained a public personality, to the great profit of his people and the world, ever since. When some of us first met him he was a generous, imaginative, good-hearted, idealistic, utterly honest man, dedicated to the unswerving pursuit of the public good. The wonder is that he has remained so to this day. Because of this, he has had a similar effect on others. One example is worth more than an infinity of precepts; and Teddy's (for no one ever calls him anything else) open-hearted, incorruptible, endlessly **[3]** constructive activity has achieved far more than the most impassioned words of those whose principal activity is oratory.

Intelligence is a gift that has, on the whole, not been denied our people; nor has human goodness. But to be both clever and kind, and that in a high degree, is less common. When these qualities are combined with very great personal charm, a lively sense of the ridiculous, a total absence of malice, vanity, or self-importance – indeed, with a positive charitableness to others, even to the obstructive and the ill-intentioned – they form an extraordinarily, irresistibly, attractive personal character.

<sup>1</sup> [i.e. in 1942.]

Teddy Kollek's achievement is stupendous. After some years of service in the private office of Ben-Gurion, he was elected mayor of the most famous city on earth, which has the eye of the world continuously upon it, the object of uninterrupted, at times violently jealous, scrutiny from every quarter of the globe. Jerusalem, sacred to three great faiths, is unique if only as the centre of so many religious communities with various and often irreconcilable ways of life and goals, of [4] passionate and often bitterly intolerant loyalties, which have marred the life of its inhabitants. This has obviously made his task one of the utmost difficulty, calling for every quality of heart and mind that anyone could be expected to possess. With great and characteristic wisdom, he chose neither, on the one hand, to promote integration of his fellow citizens into some single pattern (a polite synonym for assimilation); nor, on the other, to insulate each of the contending groups behind artificial walls, to divide Jews, Muslims, Christians; to segregate Arabs and Jews, Greeks and Armenians, Ethiopians and Copts, Catholics, Protestants, Orthodox into separate enclaves.

With this singular capacity for understanding the different needs of the different cultures, and a high degree of imagination, courage, and instinctive resistance to all that is narrow, coercive, divisive, the Mayor managed to create an atmosphere in which all the sections of the city's population breathe freely and, so far as practicable, contrive to live in the way most natural to them. The result has been that Jerusalem has miraculously remained – despite occasional outbreaks of violence – far more peaceful than could have been hoped for [5] in what was rightly regarded as the most sensitive area in the entire world. Miraculously, or perhaps not: Dr Weizmann used to say that miracles could happen, but that one had to work very hard indeed for them. Teddy has worked hard, very hard indeed: not only physically (though he does, as everyone knows, wear himself out with his over-long labours, by day and by night, to the constant concern of his innumerable friends), but by the use of every moral and intellectual resource at his command. The result is a model to the world.

He has earned in large measure the love and respect of *all* the inhabitants of Jerusalem. He is probably the only man in authority in the city, not the only Israeli or the only Jew, but the only *man*, whom all – Jew, Arab, Christian – recognise as being benevolent, just, humane, reasonable, above all, a genuinely good man. This

combination of unimpeachable personal integrity with human understanding and a rational approach to all his unending problems has long been one of the greatest moral and political assets of the state of Israel. The respect and affection in which he is held by statesmen and artists, industrialists and trade unionists, journalists and academics in many lands is evidence of this. No one has, over the [6] years, made more friends for Israel during the most critical moments of its existence.

This beautiful city has grown more human and more civilised under his hand: the parks, gardens, works of art, the theatrical and musical activity, the vast improvement in medical, educational, social aid for those who need it – all are in large measure his doing. He *is* the Jerusalem Foundation: it and its work are inconceivable without him. Even his adversaries, for the most part religious or political fanatics, those in whom violent nationalistic, religious and ethnic passions unite in a dangerous amalgam, hate him, almost against their wills, less than they do their other adversaries.

As for the Diaspora, it is worth saying again that there is no man so sincerely admired or so widely loved, surely a man unique in his generation. Yet his unheard-of popularity has not in any degree affected his character. There is no trace of pomposity in him. One does not get the sense that some people are, in his eyes, very much more important than others; he is equally courteous and friendly to Jew and gentile, old and young, rich and poor. Everyone likes him because everyone feels at home with him, feels in his presence nicer and better than [7] in fact they may be.

He has reached the Psalmist's age: a happy young man of seventy, the youngest seventy any one of us has ever known. At this point one may be accused of describing an impossible, intolerably faultless, paragon. But it would be wrong, merely in order to seem more plausible, to minimise the truth. This tribute is surely both indisputable and overdue. Long may he live to do good, guard the Holy City, and remain a source of pleasure and pride to our entire people, a heroic defender of sanity and toleration against its enemies in our own eyes and the eyes of the world.