



Meyer Weisgal

This PDF is one of a series designed to assist scholars in their research on Isaiah Berlin, and the subjects in which he was interested.

The series will make digitally available both selected published essays and edited transcripts of unpublished material.

The PDF is posted by the Isaiah Berlin Legacy Fellow at Wolfson College, with the support of the Trustees of the Isaiah Berlin Literary Trust.

All enquiries, including those concerning rights, should be directed to the Legacy Fellow at berlin@wolfson.ox.ac.uk

Meyer Weisgal

Contribution to *Meyer W. Weisgal* (New York, 1964), [22]; repr. in Edward Victor (ed.), *Meyer Weisgal at Seventy* (London, 1966: Weidenfeld and Nicolson) (as 'A Generous Imaginative Idealist'), and in *The Odyssey of an Optimist: Meyer W. Weisgal, An Anthology by His Contemporaries* (New York, 1967: Atheneum)



National Library of Israel, Schwadron collection

I SHOULD LIKE to offer my tribute to my friend Meyer Weisgal. It does not seem to me that the desire to praise a man who is

worthy of praise need conceal itself behind a mask of some kind. The substitution of some entertaining episode in which the figure to be honoured plays a comical or touching or grotesque part calculated to evoke a mixture of affection and amusement seems to me an unworthy substitute for direct expression of respect or admiration or love. I therefore do not propose to follow this path. I should simply like to say that ever since I met Meyer Weisgal – in Washington in 1940 – I thought him an exceptionally generous, imaginative and idealistic man. Beneath all his most obvious characteristics – his excessively thin skin, his quick temper, his funny and sometimes irreverent choice of words – he remains a man of farouche independence of character, whom nothing can bend or divert from the fixed purposes of his life, his Zionism, his belief in the possibility of building a rich, free and open culture: exuberant, limitless and overflowing, like his own broad and unhampered, irrepressibly gay character.

He was fortunate to have found in Dr Weizmann the incarnation of his own ideal of what a man and (what he cared about more) a Jew could be. But Dr Weizmann was fortunate, too, in having found in him a man whose combination of utter (if not uncritical) devotion and warm vitality responded to his own highly imaginative and many-sided sense of life.

Men with such fiery, impatient and large demands upon life as those that Meyer Weisgal has always made, above all, men as contemptuous of what is dry or small, inevitably attract a certain amount of criticism. I can vouch for the fact that Dr Weizmann, whatever may have passed between him and Weisgal when they were alone, used to rise like a lion to his defence whenever the mildest reservation about him was expressed. He understood and valued the central characteristics of his friend and disciple – his fearlessness, his dedication and his enthusiasm: Meyer was prepared to risk everything in a cause in which he believed, never retreated, never temporised, and openly scorned those who did. these honourable and gallant characteristics appealed to Dr Weizmann deeply – he disliked cravenness, self-protectiveness and meanness more than most other vices.

Courage, passion, a mordant wit, an acute sense of the ridiculous, the constant pursuit of a vision of some unimaginable splendour, a capacity to see through and put to flight self-importance and pompous humbug, the erratic, capricious but unconfined temperament of an artist – all these are rare qualities, and an astonishing combination in a man who insisted on describing himself as a simple working journalist. They duly captured the imagination of the first editor of the *New Yorker* (as I can testify) no less than that of the first President of the state of Israel. And with all this, the capacity and the will to cast aside everything – private life and even his inimitable *espèglerie*¹ – for the movement by which his entire life was illuminated.

This image is perhaps not quite that which his journalistic colleagues, or even some of the eminent scientists over whose fortunes he so dynamically presides, may have formed in their minds; but it is one that was certainly present in Dr Weizmann's mind, and it is one to which I subscribe completely.

To express affection and admiration is one of the most enjoyable experiences known to man, and I am delighted to have an occasion for it. Meyer Weisgal's total achievement, both in the field of American Zionism and at Rehovot, is great and largely unrecorded.

When the history of the Zionist movement and of the building of Israel comes to be written, the part which this gifted and interesting and delightful and devastating man played in it will deserve to be told in full: not all the humorous memoirs and anecdotes and jokes – what could be described as the Sholem Aleichem aspect of his existence – can obscure his solid and constructive achievement. All his life he encouraged whatever seemed to him to have the seed and hope of life in it, and his own life – despite all its distractions and the noise and haste and flurry in which it has been and is still enveloped – is, in the end, an unending sacrifice on the altar of his people, whose past means everything to him, whose faults excite his alternate sympathy and

¹ 'Buffoonery'.

MEYER WEISGAL

indignation, whose present he contemplates with pride, despair and a strange mixture of fury and love, and upon whose uncertain future his gaze is still intermittently and anxiously directed.

© *Isaiah Berlin* 1964

Posted in Isaiah Berlin Online 10 April 2022