



Portrait of Ben-Gurion

Review of Maurice Edelman

Ben-Gurion: A Political Biography

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Review of Maurice Edelman, *Ben-Gurion: A Political Biography* (London, 1964: Hodder and Stoughton; as *David: The Story of Ben-Gurion*, New York, 1964: Putnam), *Jewish Chronicle*, 25 December 1964, 7, 22



David Ben-Gurion with IB, Sde Boker, April 1962

DAVID BEN-GURION was born David Green on 10 October 1886 in Russian Poland: he emigrated to Palestine as a young Labour Zionist in 1906. His formative years, like those of the majority of poor Jewish immigrants into the United States at this period, were therefore spent in the Pale of Settlement to which the Russian Government confined most of its Jewish subjects.

But while the Jewish immigrants into the United States to a large degree retained the marks of their origin and made an easily distinguishable group within the many ‘hyphenated’ sections of the American population – free, equal, but ‘foreign-born’ – David Ben-Gurion, by insensible degrees, became identified with the soil, institutions and native population of Palestine long before it became the State of Israel. Among all those who created first the

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new Jewish establishment in Palestine and after that the Jewish state, he represented the land and its Jewish inhabitants as fully and indisputably as those children of colonists who had been born there, or those whose families had lived there for decades.

There were others of whom this was no less true – his revered mentor Berl Katznelson, his fellow-workers Ben-Zvi, Dov Hos, Moshe Sharett, Chaim Arlosoroff, Eliahu Golomb and other doughty men of that generation of pioneers. Among them he was one of the most energetic, single-minded and self-confident; and the most natural leader, least assailed by doubts or conflicting claims upon his allegiance or feeling.

His origins seem oddly irrelevant. Poland – and even the insulated Jewish community of Eastern Europe – are very remote. He stood, and stands, in the eyes, both of his own countrymen and of the world, as the embodiment of the new nation, of continuity with its historic past in the land of its origin, as if the two thousand years of dispersion and martyrdom had never been.

National leaders can be of two types. There are those with exceptionally sensitive political antennae who gather within themselves, and respond continuously to, the hopes and fears, the needs and aspirations, of the masses, which they focus as in a burning-glass, giving them direction and cohesion. And there are those who are fed by their own inner sources (however these come into being), by their own single-minded vision of the world and of the goals of the movement which they head, and impose this image upon their followers by the sheer strength of their own inward life, sometimes with total disregard of the differences which divide men, of difficulties and problems, and of the complex nature of the reality which is perceived by, and sometimes distracts and even paralyses, more sensitive and weaker natures.

Among the living, Winston Churchill, de Gaulle and de Valera belong to the latter group: Ben-Gurion is of this company, as indeed was Vladimir Jabotinsky, of whose complex relationship to Ben-Gurion Mr Edelman gives a description – the first, so far as I know, in any language. As President de Gaulle's imagination is rooted in the seventeenth century, in the kingdom of Louis XIV

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and of austere and noble Jansenism, so Ben-Gurion's imagination, quite naturally and without effort, stretches back to the Roman period and beyond that to the Kings of Judah and Israel.

Mr Edelman deals with this fascinating topic with all his accustomed elegance, perspicacity and judgement. He begins with a description of the social background. His account of the Pale of Settlement, that most extraordinary state within a state within the Russian Empire where modern Jewish national sentiment was born (even though the catalyst came from the West), is certainly acute, imaginative and affectionately drawn. His account of the Ashkenazim (49) is historically peculiar, but this is a mere speck on his admirable, if necessarily brief, account of the condition of the Jews of Eastern Europe in the latter half of the nineteenth century.

He traces the career of the future Prime Minister from Poland to Palestine through his student days in Constantinople, and his activities as a propagandist for the Jewish Legion in the First World War among the Jews of the United States. Here, too Mr Edelman shows himself a sure-footed guide through the intricacies of the New York Jewish establishment.

Perhaps the portrait is at times too courtly: he attributes to the magnificent labour leader a capacity for creating single-handed a form of Zionism for which others can claim credit: for example, the mixture of 'practical' colonising activity with political organisation and pressure in the Diaspora was, in fact, the very formula of Weizmann's 'synthetic' Zionism for which he was, in his day, much criticised, but which Mr Edelman, it seems to me rightly, approves.

The organisation of Jewish labour in Palestine was surely more of a collective endeavour than appears here. It would scarcely have taken its present form without the ideas of Borochof and even Brenner, or the agrarian base created by, for instance, Ruppin, to whom full justice has yet to be done.

Ben-Gurion's part in creating the Jewish military unit during the Second World War is fully described. In the course of it Mr Edelman quotes a very characteristic and trenchant minute by Sir Winston Churchill to the then Secretary of War, Lord Lloyd, which

throws a fascinating light on both, and on the difficulties with which Weizmann, in particular, had to grapple. Mr Edelman gives interesting details of Ben-Gurion's insistence on the need for a policy with regard to the Arabs, for the lack of which he rightly blamed the Revisionists, but is there any evidence that he (or any other effective Zionist leader) had ever formulated a workable Arab policy that had any chance of success? Perhaps there is: Mr Edelman would render a historic service if he devoted his mind and intellectual gifts to unravelling this issue, which is far from dead today.

Ben-Gurion's behaviour during the agonising years of terror and counter-terror during and after the Second World War – perhaps his finest hour – is tellingly described. Mr Edelman states the Jewish case without diminishing the appalling difficulties which faced any fair-minded British administrator in an impossible situation, and I feel sure that he must be right in supposing that Ernest Bevin's image of the Jews was that of a 'multiplication of Professor Harold Laski' (133). Yet this was the same man who also remarked to Mr Edelman that 'The trouble with the Zionists is that they're not educated' (134).

Mr Edelman's purpose has been to draw an etching, not a full-size painting, and this he has done with admirable skill. It carries complete conviction. Within such a framework, he has wisely not attempted to include a condensed history of the State of Israel. But as a result there is perhaps too little here about Ben-Gurion's tactics and conduct as a party leader: about his peculiar mixture of generosity and sense of ancient wrongs, high idealism and *terribilità*. There is nothing here about the strange 'Lavon affair', the con[22]sequences of which are once again making themselves felt; nor about the deep differences that have divided him from his life-long colleague Sharett, about his relationship to Weizmann, whom he admired and deprived of power; nor about the affinities, psychological and political, that bind him to such younger men as Dayan and Peres.

He may reply that these things can be justly estimated only after contemporary passions have died down and the documents have

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been made accessible, when even the Sinai Campaign, its causes and its consequences, can be judged – morally as well as historically – against a background of wider knowledge. Perhaps so. At any rate Mr Edelman never lectures, never bullies or bores the reader, is never pompous or self-assertive, or irrelevant.

His sense of the social background is uncannily accurate, his historical sense is never at fault, and the few misspellings (one of which seems due to Miss Hannah Arendt) are more than redeemed by the excellent photographs. For the ignorant there is a glossary, for the critical a serious bibliography; the book is wholly readable; the verdicts are judicious and moderate, even though the evidence is not always on display. Mr Edelman's great good sense, his moral tact and his literary skill have served him, and the reader, very well indeed.

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