



Jewish Books in Review

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Ben-Gurion: Prophet of Fire, By Dan Kurzman, Simon and Schuster, 1230 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10020. 1983. 544 pages, with extensive notes, bibliography and index, \$19.95.

Reviewed by David M. Szonyi

The result of fifteen years of research and three of writing, and based in part on over 500 interviews, *Ben-Gurion: Prophet of Fire* captures the passionate, driven quality of Israel's founding father. Ben-Gurion often was daring, courageous and insistent on pursuing policies that the majority of his Labor comrades opposed, but he could also be a patient, disciplined institution-builder. Practically alone, he established the Histadrut (Israel's huge labor union and manufacturing concern), and forged the disparate elements of Palestine's non-Communist Left into Mapai (the Labor Party).

In 1948, he devoted himself with characteristic intensity to military affairs, forging Israel's army and, in the process, eliminating threats to its unity from both the political Right (Menachem Begin's Irgun) and the Left (the Mapam-dominated Palmach). His quick transformation from a political leader to a military tactician is comparable to that of Leon Trotsky in 1917.

His self-confident intensity, however, sometimes led to Machiavellian ruthlessness. In 1933, when two Revisionist Zionists were accused of the assassination of Labor leader Chaim Arlosorff, Ben-Gurion hungrily exploited the charges — which were never proved — during the election campaign for the forthcoming Zionist congress. Twenty years later, he blamed Israeli settlers for the massacre of civilians in the Jordanian town of Kibya during an anti-terrorist action. Although he knew the slaughter had been perpetrated by Commando Unit 101, led by Ariel Sharon, Ben-Gurion was intent on protecting the reputation of his beloved army.

If his writing is occasionally a bit hagiographic — at one point, he refers to Ben-Gurion as a "new messiah," and several times calls him a "prophet" — Kurzman also probes his subject's failures and weaknesses. One of his best chapters is on Ben-Gurion during the Holocaust, a period during which he was so focused on contesting Chaim Weizmann for the

leadership of the Zionist movement that he "barely squeaked" about the terrible plight of European Jewry.

Other biographers of Ben-Gurion that I've read "fade" in dealing with the period following the War of Independence, but Kurzman is as informative about the 1949-63 period as he is about the rest of Ben-Gurion's life. He shows us the "old man's" misgivings about the 1956 Sinai campaign — with some reason, he mistrusted his British and French allies — and his desperate search for political and military support in Paris, Bonn and Washington throughout the 1950s and early '60s. During his last five years in power, Ben-Gurion also fought with the rest of the Labor "establishment" by trying to bring Shimon Peres, Moshe Dayan, and other political proteges into positions of power.

The last years of Ben-Gurion's long (1886-1973) life were hardly satisfying. He was increasingly obsessed with the intricate spy-defense scandal known as the Lavon Affair, and his retirement was marred by the political fiasco around his attempts to organize a new political party (Rafi), his wife's death, and times of mental confusion. Before his death a few months after the Yom Kippur War ended, Ben-Gurion experienced much isolation and loneliness in Sde Boker; he was a prophet who had outlived his time.

Kurzman is particularly revealing about Ben-Gurion's personal qualities. He could, for example, be cruelly neglectful of his wife, Paula. During their forty-seven year marriage, she often paid the price for Ben-Gurion's growing prominence, although she remained a highly devoted mother/protector figure for him. Among the more positive sides of his personality were Ben-Gurion's loyalty and devotion to his staff, his capacity for close, life-long friendships with women (especially Rachel Nelkin, the great love of his early adulthood), his anti-materialism and his love for books and learning.

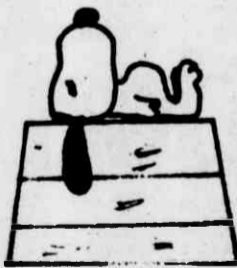
The major weakness of Kurzman's biography is its lack of distance from its subject, its focus on narrative to the exclusion of analysis. If the author is a gifted stylist, he unfortunately slurs over some important issues. For example, he relates that it took Ben-Gurion two years (1928-1930) to unite the



disparate political groupings that were to become Mapai, but he never really informs us what the issues were.

This weakness prevents *Ben-Gurion: Prophet of Fire* from being a definitive biography, one which really encompasses the full achievements and shortcomings of this extraordinary figure. Given Ben-Gurion's leadership of both the Zionist movement and Israel for almost half a century, such a biography should be longer and more inclusive than Kurzman's. But Kurzman, a careful and hard-working researcher and an immensely gifted writer, has nevertheless produced a very fine one-volume work, one which is equally informative about the man and the political leader. If a little too focused on Ben-Gurion himself (as opposed to the forces and times which shaped him), this biography still conclusively demonstrates why "B-G" is perhaps the one "giant" of twentieth-century Jewish history.

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How Israel's Borders Were Shaped

By Janet Mendelsohn Moshe
(Copyright 1983.)
(Jewish Telegraphic Agency, Inc.)

Editors Note: Jerusalem journalist Janet Mendelsohn Moshe came to Israel in 1979 from North Carolina. This feature was provided exclusively to the Jewish Telegraphic Agency by the World Zionist Organization Department of Information-Press Section.)

From ancient times the settlement of Hanita has guarded the passes from the mountains of Lebanon to the fertile valley below. Rebuilt in the western Galilee in 1938 on a hilly ridge bordering Lebanon, the kibbutz is now celebrating its 45th anniversary.

And as one of more than 100 stockade and watchtower settlements hastily erected in pre-State Israel between 1939 and 1947, Hanita is representative of the defense settlement which in the course of time was to play a vital role in determining the borders of the State of Israel.

Just as 11 settlements established overnight in the Negev in October 1946 tilted the scales in the United Nations decision to include the Negev in the Jewish State, so the stockade and watchtower pioneers were to make an unforgettable contribution to the ultimate shape of Israel.

Several factors led to the decision to settle outlying areas in Palestine intensively in the late 1930's. The Arab uprising from 1936-39 which led to the loss of 600 Jewish lives (out of a population of less than half a million), was characterized by attacks on isolated Jewish settlements. The British Peel Commission suggested in 1937 a partition of Palestine, emphasizing in the eyes of the Jewish Agency the vital importance of widespread settlement. Nazi oppression also impelled thousands of European Jews to seek refuge in Palestine, including many who wanted to settle on the land.

Economic viability was not so important in the choice of new locations. Large tracts of land were purchased by the Jewish National Fund far from population centers. Top priority went to the upper and western Galilee, and the Jordan and Beith Shean valleys. It was in the latter that Kibbutz Nir David (Tel Amal) was established as the first of

these settlements in 1936. By World War II, another 50 had been founded.

A typical settlement was 35 by 35 meters in size, and surrounded by a wall made of wooden panels with gravel sandwiched in between to help render them bullet-proof. Prefabricated huts served as living quarters and a dining area, and a watchtower in the center of the enclosure had a large searchlight powered by a generator to search for infiltrators and signal for help if necessary.

At dawn of an appointed day, a convey with tens of lorries took to the roads loaded with everything needed to set up the outpost, and an empty patch of land had become a solid encampment by nightfall. Neighboring settlers joined in to help finish the first stage of the work at top speed. The young men and women of the Hagana who settled and defended these areas knew that this was no picnic.

Two out of the 91 settlers fell on the night Hanita was established and it had to repel incessant attacks, the death toll rising to 10 in the initial period. This was the first village to be built on Jewish National Fund land in the western part of Upper Galilee, with the intention of protecting the northern border.

Today its population of 700 adults is made up of one third veteran settlers as well as members from 27 countries, including many youth aliyah graduates of Oriental background. Its sources of livelihood include a metal tool factory, orchards, poultry and field crops.

A 19-year-old new immigrant, Ephraim Shilo, was one of the Hagana recruits who took part in the settling of the stockade and watchtower kibbutz of Tirat Zvi in 1937. Reflecting back on the difficult beginning of this Beit Shean valley kibbutz, he says that the overall plan of placing settlements in four corners of the map (Hanita in the western Galilee, Daphna in the upper Galilee, Tirat Zvi, southeast in the Beit Shean valley, and later, settlements in the Negev) proved to be one of the most important strategic measures of the early "yishuv" (Jewish population). But it was no easy task for the first 50 settlers of Tirat Zvi to eke out a living.

Older Adult Luncheon

The January Older Adult Luncheon will be held Thursday, January 12 at 11:30 am with Charlotte B'nai B'rith Women as the host organization. All community senior adults are welcome to the lunch and entertainment program at a cost of \$1 per person. The special program during the luncheon is a travelogue on Israel.

Transportation to Temple Beth El will be provided for those needing it. You are asked to R.S.V.P. by Friday, January 6 by calling the JCC at 366-0357. At this time please indicate if you will need transportation or if you can assist by providing a ride for someone else. If you have specific dietary restrictions for health reasons let us know when you call.

Substitute Chai Drivers

The JCC is looking for individuals who would like to volunteer to transport Chai members on occasional Mondays and to special events. Please call Abby at the JCC, 366-0357 if you'd like to help.

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