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We Are Conquerors

Adam Shatz

A State at Any Cost: The Life of David Ben-Gurion by Tom Segev
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David Ben-Gurion, the founder of the state of Israel, was brooding, explosive, often on the verge of collapse: every obstacle he faced was a 'catastrophe'. He dabbled in mysticism, consulted fortune-tellers, claimed to see flying saucers, and lived according to his whims. At one point he went on an unannounced holiday from his duties as prime minister to take driving lessons on the French Riviera; on another occasion, he spent a week studying Buddhism in Burma, and tried to persuade his teachers that he'd stumbled on a contradiction in their doctrine no one else had unearthed. He offered the presidency to Einstein – who didn't live in Israel or speak Hebrew – and loved surrounding himself with great minds, not least for the opportunities it gave him to put them in their place: he had an endless supply of chutzpah. The needs of other people, including his own family, weren't quite real to him. He wrote lofty letters to his wife, Paula, extolling her sacrifices on his behalf and that of the Jewish state (he drew no distinction) but mostly neglected her. He told his longtime mistress, the journalist Rivka Katznelson, that he couldn't distinguish her body from any other woman's. As Paula put it, 'he doesn't understand people.'

Oblivious as he was to the needs of those around him, however, he had a rare ability to lead; to convey, in Tom Segev's words, 'a feeling that he knows what needs to be done ... People believed in him because he believed in himself.' He was a man of action, all of

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it directed at a single goal: building the Jewish state in Palestine. If this meant disregarding international law or defying the wishes of the indigenous inhabitants of the land, the Palestinian Arabs, so be it: 'What the gentiles say is less important than what the Jews do.' ('Jews', not 'Zionists': Ben-Gurion believed it was incumbent on all Jews to settle in his state.) Yet in his journals, which Segev quotes at length, he revealed 'a capacity for sensitive and courageous self-examination and a willingness to undertake it'. He knew that the national salvation he promised his people spelled national destruction for another.

He had little compassion for those who stood in the way of his ambitions: the Palestinians, above all, but also those Jews who weren't cut out to be 'Zionist soldiers' – traumatised survivors of the Holocaust, 'primitive' immigrants from Arab countries. As Israel's leader during the 1948 war and as its prime minister for most of the next 15 years, Ben-Gurion was not a dictator, but he had a dictator's ruthlessness, and the authority to impose his will while presenting it as political common sense – turning it into a nation's ideology. He helped shape Israel's distinctive mixture of technological futurism and religious chauvinism, procedural liberalism and ethnic discrimination; its cult of strength and contempt for weakness; its preference for military solutions and disdain for international law; its aggressive assertion of sovereignty (tempered only for the sake of continued superpower patronage); its weaponising of the Holocaust; and, not least, its racism towards Arabs and other non-whites.

Segev met Ben-Gurion once, in 1968, when he interviewed him at his home in Sde Boker, a kibbutz in the Negev, for a Hebrew University student newspaper. Ben-Gurion was 82, but he was 'still sharp and radiated power'. Segev, now 74, has spent four decades exploring Ben-Gurion's impact on Israel, in a body of work that has no equal either for the brilliance of his storytelling or the ironies of his analysis. He is neither a sentimental apologist for Ben-Gurion nor a crusading dethroner in the style of the New Historians with whom he has often been grouped. He is, rather, a student of power, and is at once fascinated and horrified by what he sees.

Ben-Gurion was born David Yosef Gruen in 1886, into a Yiddish-speaking family of three brothers and two sisters in the town of Płońsk, seventy kilometres west of Warsaw. The Gruens lived in an insular Jewish world and never thought of themselves as Poles. Ben-Gurion's father, Victor, was an early supporter of Theodor Herzl and nurtured his son's Zionism; Ben-Gurion claimed that he knew at the age of three that he would eventually live in Palestine. In his teens he joined Po'alei Zion ('Workers of Zion') and soon established himself as a 'thuggish labour boss': he and his comrades would go around Płońsk with pistols, extorting money from wealthy Jews to improve conditions for Jewish workers. 'We have weapons and we will kill you all like dogs,' Ben-Gurion is said to have told his enemies in the Bund, who were socialists but not Zionists. When speaking of his heroes, he expressed himself in a different register, infused with romantic nationalism: on Herzl's death in 1904, Ben-Gurion proclaimed him 'the instrument of the gods', thanks to whom Zionism would triumph in 'the land of poetry and truth, of flowers and the visions of the prophets'.

The rabbis of Płońsk did not share his admiration. Zionism violated the Talmudic prohibition against any attempt to reconquer the Holy Land before the return of the Messiah, and they forbade their followers from marrying into Zionist families. But Ben-Gurion argued that Jews should take their destiny into their own hands and return to the land God had promised them. He read the Bible as history. He was horrified when the Zionist Congress of 1903 considered a proposal to resettle Jews in Uganda; only Palestine would do, and in the aftermath of the Kishinev pogrom the same year he began making his own plans for aliyah, 'ascent' to the biblical homeland. In 1906, abandoning his studies in Warsaw, he travelled from Odessa to Palestine by boat. The first Arabs he met struck him as 'goodhearted and friendly … You could say that they are big children.'

In the two decades before Ben-Gurion's arrival, the number of Jews in Palestine – most of them Eastern Europeans fleeing the pogroms – had doubled, but the population remained overwhelmingly Arab, and living conditions were austere. At least half the Jews who arrived with Ben-Gurion in the Second Aliyah returned home. Although he was intoxicated by the landscape and 'the sea, which glitters with rays of gold', Ben-Gurion admitted in a letter to his father that a 'huge will' was required to stay. The woman he had followed to Palestine had fallen for another man, and he was condemned to 'dirty work' in an orange grove – what was worse, his boss was an Arab. He soon came down with malaria. 'I am living alone today,' he wrote to his father on his twentieth birthday. Yet for all his misery, he refused to join those 'mummified Jews' who were running back to Płońsk.

Po’alei Zion began with only about 150 supporters in Palestine, but Ben-Gurion moulded it into a political party. He also established a Jewish-only labour union, the Histadrut, the first administrative institution of the Yishuv, the Jewish community in Palestine. Ben-Gurion was no manual labourer himself – he was known as a ‘consummate idler’ – but he believed it was only through Jewish labour that the land could be conquered and ‘redeemed’. The problem was that Jewish farmers in the moshavot (new Jewish towns) preferred Arab workers, who were more experienced, less combative and cheaper to hire. So at Ben-Gurion’s instigation militants from Po’alei Zion showed up at farms armed with sticks and daggers, threatening Arab workers and demanding that their jobs be given to Jews. One employer said he appreciated such Zionist idealism; he just didn’t think Eastern Europeans were up to the work. Ben-Gurion responded by promoting an initiative to recruit Yemeni Jews to replace Arabs. ‘The simple, natural worker’ of Yemen was, like the Arabs, ‘able to work at anything, with no shame, no philosophy, and no poetry’, according to a Zionist newspaper. ‘And Mr Marx [is] certainly not to be found either in his pocket or his brain.’ Their faith apart, the Yemeni Jewish labourers were no different from the Arab peasants they replaced, but this was no consolation to the fellahin who lost their jobs. The war for Palestine began as much as a labour conflict as a struggle for the land itself.

Ben-Gurion never imagined that Palestine was a land without a people for a people without a land, a fable he ridiculed as ‘naive Zionism’. He believed that Jews, as the rightful owners of Palestine, ‘deserved to receive it despite the fact that it was populated by Arabs’. He felt ‘at home’ in Ilaniya, a placid moshavah in the lower Galilee, because he didn’t have to see any Arabs, but the Arabs of Sejera were close by, and in 1909 Ilaniya was attacked by local workers furious about being excluded from the Jewish-only settlement. Ben-Gurion saw one of his friends shot to death by a man hiding behind a prickly pear. For him, the attack exposed ‘the huge might of Arab hostility’ and the dangers of Jewish weakness. ‘We are not workers,’ he said. ‘We are conquerors. Conquerors of the land.’ In 1912 he took the name Ben-Gurion, after the first-century Hebrew statesman Yosef Ben-Gurion, who led the Great Revolt against the Romans.

For all his braggadocio, Ben-Gurion understood that the Yishuv couldn’t conquer the land without an external patron. He began by supporting the idea that the Ottoman Empire could oversee Palestine as a kind of Jewish protectorate: he would represent Palestine’s Jews in the Ottoman parliament, or even in the Ottoman cabinet. He briefly studied in Istanbul and described himself as an Ottoman patriot. But in December 1914 Turkish forces surrounded Jewish neighbourhoods on the edge of Jaffa and deported Jews not holding Ottoman passports on Italian ships. Ben-Gurion was deported soon afterwards; he went to New York, where he met and married Paula Munweis, a Russian-Jewish anarchist. He found the patron he needed in 1917, when Britain announced its support for the creation of a ‘national home for the Jewish people’. Ben-Gurion couldn’t claim credit for the Balfour Declaration: it was largely the work of Chaim Weizmann, leader of the Zionist Organisation, who had persuaded Balfour that the interests of the British Empire and those of the Zionist movement went hand in hand.

After hearing of the declaration, Ben-Gurion enlisted in the British army’s Jewish legion, leaving his pregnant wife in the US to begin training in Canada. Made up of five thousand soldiers, the legion was a ‘Zionist illusion, of zero military value’, Segev writes, but it allowed Ben-Gurion to get back to Palestine, and he relished its symbolism: ‘One doesn’t receive a country; one conquers it.’ Arriving in Port Said in September 1918, he declared: ‘I have returned to my land with my rifle in hand, under the Hebrew banner, a member of the Jewish legion.’ Over the next two decades, he consolidated his control over the Zionist movement. He advocated Jewish immigration to Palestine, raised money among wealthy Jews abroad and promoted the idea of Hebrew labour. As Segev makes clear, his ‘socialism’ was always in the service of his nationalism: when he invoked the ‘dictatorship of the Hebrew labourer’, he meant the dictatorship of the Histadrut and Mapai, the Palestinian Workers’ Party he founded in 1930. He replaced Weizmann as head of the Jewish Agency, and they frequently clashed. Weizmann was a more cautious leader, so keen to assuage British concerns that at one point he agreed to shelve the demand for a Jewish state: asking for a state in Palestine, he said, was like asking for one in Manhattan. But Ben-Gurion believed in the necessity of street combat, and was prepared to see blood shed – Jewish blood included. (He once threatened to starve a Jewish settlement if it failed to capitulate to his demands.) ‘You are Bolsheviks,’ Isser Harel, a future head of the Mossad, told him. ‘Not in the communist sense, but in the sense of the dictatorship of the party.’

Ben-Gurion never concealed his admiration of Lenin, ‘a man of iron will who does not spare human life and the blood of innocent children for the sake of the revolution’.

Eastern European Jews like himself, he believed, made the best Zionists because they had been touched by the flames of the October Revolution. After Hitler's rise to power – 'a huge political and economic boost for the Zionist enterprise', in his words – he fought attempts to resettle German Jews anywhere other than Palestine. But he ended up taking a dim view of the new arrivals: they were 'Hitler Zionists' who had come to Palestine in search of refuge rather than national salvation and had suspiciously conciliatory attitudes towards the Arabs. Nor was he shy of using antisemitic language when confronted by immigrants who 'live off the labour of others ... luft-masses, eager to speculate, living in air ... dangling, sterile and parasitic'. Ben-Gurion wanted 'not just any immigrants but pioneers'.

He was intent on building a Jewish state, not a sanctuary, and he was doing so in the certainty that this would lead to war with the Arab majority. Although he did not yet speak of expulsion, the idea of 'transfer', always present in Zionist ideology, would assume growing prominence in his thinking. The 'price of Zionism', as Segev puts it, was permanent conflict, which could be managed but never resolved. His wish to counter the rising force of Arab nationalism was tempered only by his partnership with the British, who had been given mandatory control over Palestine after the war, and now found themselves caught between their commitment to the Yishuv and their need to contain the anger of the Palestinian Arab community. But Ben-Gurion was adept at turning events to his advantage. When, in 1930, the British released a white paper that reinterpreted Balfour as a 'dual and equal commitment to both Jews and Arabs' most Zionists were furious. Ben-Gurion, however, took his colleagues to task for succumbing to panic: 'Such hysterical mood swings are not to our credit and we need to fight them with all our strength.' (The white paper was eventually revoked.) The Peel Commission report of 1937, which recommended partition into two states and the restriction of immigration to 12,000 Jews a year, was even more disappointing, but Ben-Gurion saw it as 'the strongest possible impetus for the step-by-step conquest of Palestine as a whole'. The commission, he noted, was proposing to move Arabs out of territory that had been assigned to the Jewish state: 'compulsory transfer', he underlined approvingly in his diary. Who would carry out the transfer was unclear: ideally the British, he thought; or perhaps the Zionist Organisation could pay Iraq £10 million to absorb the refugees. In his diary he kept a list of Arab villages with the numbers of their inhabitants. 'Our movement is maximalist,' he wrote. 'Even all of Palestine is not our final goal.'

Ben-Gurion would eventually throw his weight behind the Jewish revolt against British rule that began to surge in the late 1930s, in part because he was afraid of being upstaged by the right-wing militias of the underground – Menachem Begin's Irgun and Yitzhak Shamir's Lehi. But he postponed his confrontation with the British for as long as he could. When an Arab nationalist suggested that they join forces against the British, he replied that Jews would never fight the British – and notified the high commissioner of the man's remark. The Jewish Agency had relied on the Mandate authorities to help suppress the Arab revolts of the 1920s and 1930s, and would support Britain in its fight against the Axis powers. In public Ben-Gurion denounced the Mandate as a 'half-Nazi regime', but Britain also provided a bulwark against a Nazi invasion of Palestine, which would have necessitated a mass evacuation of the Jewish population. During the war the British recruited, armed and trained thousands of young Jews, enabling Ben-Gurion to develop his forces, the Haganah (Hebrew for 'defence'), into an increasingly powerful army. He also created a separate organisation called 'Special Squads', designed to punish Arabs for attacks on Jews. The use of special forces, whose relationship to the state could conveniently be denied, would become a cornerstone of Israel's 'aggressive self-defence' after the war.

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In the struggle for Palestine, no matter was too small to receive Ben-Gurion's attention. Yet his response to the greatest threat to Jewish survival was strangely disengaged. 'The catastrophe of European Jewry is not directly my responsibility,' he said when asked about the work of the Jewish Agency's Rescue Committee, established in 1942. Segev reveals that Ben-Gurion had learned about the extermination of Polish Jews a year earlier, from a Palestinian Christian businessman in the US; he also met a woman from Poland who told him a 'story of horrors and torments that no Dante or Poe could possibly imagine'. But his mission was to save 'the Hebrew nation in its land' rather than to save Jews from destruction. As he told members of Mapai in 1938, 'if I knew that it was possible to save all the children in Germany by transporting them to England, but only half by transporting them to Palestine, I would choose the second.'

He never faced that choice. While he would often claim that the six million Jews who died in the Holocaust would be in Palestine if the state had already existed, the Yishuv

wouldn’t have had the capacity to absorb them. (About sixty thousand Jews arrived during the war.) Segev suggests that Ben-Gurion’s coolness in the face of the catastrophe ‘was more than anything else helplessness’. But this doesn’t explain why Ben-Gurion dismissed out of hand the idea of bombing Auschwitz and the railroads leading from Hungary to Poland, or his judgment that ‘the terrible historical significance of the Nazi slaughter’ lay not in the ‘frightening number of Jews who were massacred’, but in the fact that it eliminated ‘that select part of the nation that alone, among all the Jews, was capable and equipped with all the characteristics and abilities needed for the building of a state’. That Jewish existence in much of Europe had been annihilated didn’t seem to move him; he saw Zionism, and his state, as the principal victim of the Nazis’ crimes against humanity. When he visited the displaced persons camps after the war, Ben-Gurion carried himself like ‘a commander surveying his troops’. Some of the survivors gave him a hero’s welcome, but others were frustrated that he ‘did not know how to offer paternal sympathy for their personal suffering; he could only see the Holocaust as a national catastrophe.’ He chided a resistance hero for giving a speech in Yiddish – a ‘jarring, foreign language’.

The Holocaust, the DP camps, the Yiddish of his youth: all were reminders of the diaspora life he had escaped, and of the ‘sin of weakness’, at precisely the moment that he was steeling himself for battle. Six weeks after the war ended, he met a group of wealthy Jews in New York to raise money for arms and equipment for the coming war of independence against the British. Rudolf Goldschmidt Sonneborn, his host, reassured the guests that the Arabs would be no obstacle to Zionist ambitions, since ‘the average of that race is inferior even to our average Negro.’ The Sonneborn Institute would funnel money and supplies to the Haganah – an organisation of whose existence Ben-Gurion claimed to be unaware when he spoke to an Anglo-American commission in March 1946. Four months later Begin’s group, the Irgun, bombed Jerusalem’s King David Hotel, the headquarters of the Mandate administration, killing more than ninety people. The orders had come from the chief of the Haganah National Command, who told Begin to ‘carry out that little hotel thing at the earliest opportunity’. Ben-Gurion issued a statement of protest, distancing himself from the attack, but, as Segev remarks, it ‘was not particularly vehement’.

Three months after the bombing he was pleading with the British to extend the Mandate. ‘We are the only group in the entire Middle East that wants to be and can be your friends,’ he told the Colonial Office. Some, like the Labour MP Richard Crossman, were sceptical. Crossman accused Ben-Gurion, ‘the dictator who runs the Jews in Palestine, including the illegal army’, of playing a ‘double game’. The reason for the double game was that the Haganah wasn’t yet ready to defend the Yishuv against an Arab invasion: Ben-Gurion still needed Britain’s army. After the UN General Assembly’s partition resolution in November 1947, Ben-Gurion would recall: ‘I was perhaps the only Jew who did not dance.’ Still, he put a brave face on things. ‘It is truly the beginning of the Redemption, and even more than the beginning,’ he declared. The map drawn up by the UN had its problems (about a half million Arabs would remain in the Jewish state) but ‘the borders of the land under Jewish rule’ had always ‘changed all the time’ and were merely ‘a possible stage in the process of expanding the state’s territory’.

Fighting between the Palestinians and the Yishuv broke out as soon as the partition resolution passed, and grew in intensity up until the official end of the British Mandate in May 1948, when the armies of the neighbouring Arab states attacked – by which point the Palestinian catastrophe, or Nakba, was already well underway. The Arab Higher Committee, the Palestinian Arabs’ main leadership body, had responded to the UN resolution with a three-day general strike; Arabs opened fire on buses in Petah Tikvah, killing five. At this point Ben-Gurion began to speak of expulsion (‘driving out the inhabitants and capturing the place’) as an explicit war aim. His forces did not act alone: there were also the fighters of the Irgun and Lehi, and the shock troops of the Palmach, a left-Zionist group that revered the Red Army. But Ben-Gurion imposed his authority and by the war’s end the Irgun was violently brought to heel and the Palmach disbanded. Segev makes it clear that Ben-Gurion set policy over the fate of the Palestinians. He spoke in a quiet voice; sometimes he would drift off into silence or cite a passage from the Bible (especially the verses in Exodus in which God promises to send hornets to drive foreigners out of Israel). He explained to his generals what he wanted – ‘maximum territory, minimum Arabs’, in Segev’s words – and left it to them to realise his intentions. There was often ‘no need to issue an explicit order to expel Arabs – the spirit of the message conveyed by the commander in chief was sufficient.’ The soldiers who carried out the expulsions were the heroes of the war of independence: Yitzhak Rabin, Yigal Allon and Moshe Dayan, all tzabarim, native-born Israelis, whom Ben-Gurion loved.

Sitting on a hotel balcony in Haifa in May 1948, two weeks before Israel's declaration of independence, Ben-Gurion watched the procession of the city's Palestinians to the port. Haganah used mortar fire to drive out the final few. In his diary, he described the fall of Arab Haifa as 'a terrifying and fantastic sight … A dead city – a corpse of a city'. He claimed to be shocked that 'tens of thousands, without any sufficient reason, leave their city, their homes, and their wealth in such a panic,' though only a few weeks earlier Irgun and Lehi forces had massacred more than one hundred Palestinians in the village of Deir Yassin. He was no less pleased by what he found in West Jerusalem: 'There are no foreigners. One hundred per cent Jews … What happened in Jerusalem and what happened in Haifa can happen in large parts of the country, if we endure.'

Of the 700,000 Palestinians who were driven into exile during the Nakba, roughly half left their homes during the last six months of British rule. The expulsions accelerated after the Mandate ended. During the 1948 war tens of thousands of Palestinians in Lydda and Ramleh were forced out: Ben-Gurion had 'waved his hand in a manner that Rabin interpreted as a directive to expel them'. According to one of the field commanders of the newly formed Israel Defence Forces – comprising Haganah, Irgun and Lehi troops – 'a strange stillness pervaded the streets' of Ramleh, 'as if after a pogrom'. By December, Ben-Gurion was able to marvel in his diary: 'It is almost unbelievable: along the way from Tel Aviv to Tiberias, there are almost no Arabs.'

Israel suffered heavy losses in the war: six thousand dead, a third of them civilians – 1 per cent of the Jewish population. But its forces were better trained and – thanks in part to a delivery of weapons that Ben-Gurion procured from Czechoslovakia – better armed. 'We won,' he said, 'because the Arabs were exceptionally weak.' Although he would often claim that Israel was a country of 700,000 fighting against thirty million Arabs, he knew that Israel had as many soldiers as the Arab states put together – about 100,000. When the war ended, in 1949, Israel had acquired 40 per cent more territory than it had been assigned in the partition agreement. This fell short of his hopes of seizing Damascus and extending Israel's borders to the Litani River in southern Lebanon. He had also avoided taking the Old City of Jerusalem, since it was full of Arabs and haredim, the ultra-Orthodox ('the blacks', he called them, because of their garments). But he kept alive the idea of future expansion by refusing to allow the Declaration of Independence to specify where the state's borders lay. When a jurist told him it was impossible to dodge this question, he replied: 'Everything is possible.'

Some things, however, were not possible, and one was moving into the old Arab house in Jerusalem that he was offered as a residence after the war. According to Segev, Ben-Gurion thought it unbecoming for an Israeli official to live in a home confiscated from an Arab: it was as if he wanted 'to draw a line between himself and all that'. What, exactly, was 'all that'? At times, Ben-Gurion would say that since half the Arabs had left during the Mandate they were Britain's responsibility, and since the other half had left during the war they were not refugees but enemies. At others, he spoke frankly of mass expulsions, though he justified them as a necessary price for the conquest of the Land of Israel. Among the most revealing remarks he made about the Nakba is that history had proven 'who is really connected to this land'. Thanks to their military supremacy, the Jewish state's soldiers and pioneers had, he believed, not only established their right of ownership but had redeemed themselves, cleansing themselves of the sin, the shame, of weakness. His astonishment at the Palestinians fleeing Haifa was of a piece with his discomfort with Jews who failed to fight back against the Nazis: they were a spectacle of collective passivity in defeat.

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As prime minister of the new state, Ben-Gurion soon found himself regretting the end of 'Zionism's primal era', the time of the pioneers, the conquerors of the land. The realities of forging a nation involved difficult concessions, notably with the religious establishment. He defended the right of secular Jews to drive on the Sabbath – 'Do you think that if they do not go to the beach, they will go to synagogue?' – but gave the Orthodox rabbinate considerable authority over religious affairs. Yeshiva students were exempted from army service, and the rabbis were given the power to define who was and wasn't a Jew, and which marriages would be recognised. (His own feeling was that Jewish women shouldn't be allowed to marry Arab men 'because as I see it an Arab is still not on the human level that I would want for a man who marries a Jewish woman.') Although not secular, Ben-Gurion wasn't much of a temple-goer and had little time for 'the blacks', but he didn't want to sow division by clearly separating religion and state. In the 1920s he had permitted Orthodox men to vote twice in the Jewish Assembly of Representatives – once for themselves and once for their wives – and he continued to pursue this habit of compromise.

He had enough headaches with his people already, the biggest of which was that the wrong Jews were arriving. American Jews didn't want to come; Soviet Jews couldn't come. Instead, Israel was getting what he called 'human debris': Holocaust survivors ('Everything they had endured purged their souls of all good') and Mizrahi Jews whose lives in Arab countries had become all but impossible after Israel's creation. In 1949, nearly one in ten of Israel's first million citizens lived in camps, waiting to be 'absorbed' into the state. The Mizrahis presented a particular challenge, as Ben-Gurion saw it, since 'these people do not know how to make hygienic use of a toilet in a home.' (He suggested building outhouses for them instead.) 'We came here as Europeans,' Ben-Gurion insisted; he did everything in his power to prevent the state's 'Levantisation'. And Arab Jews, of course, looked and dressed like Arabs, which was a problem from the vantage point of security.

Security was Ben-Gurion's obsession, as it was for most Israeli Jews after the Holocaust. The war had ended but he expected it to be followed by other wars, and 'new catastrophes, no less horrible, can occur.' To ward off this possibility, he developed close ties with the country responsible for the most recent catastrophe. His reasons for re-establishing relations with 'this different Germany' in the early 1950s were dictated by Israel's best interests as he saw them, but the prospect of a partnership with the people who had presided over Auschwitz scandalised Israeli Jews, especially the survivors, many of whom already found Ben-Gurion's state to be a chilly place. When his negotiations with Konrad Adenauer were made public, Ben-Gurion had to call in the army to suppress a demonstration in Jerusalem at which Begin described reconciliation with Germany as 'the most shameful event in our people's history'. But, as Ben-Gurion saw it, 'money has no odour.' The Germans, keen to be rehabilitated in the eyes of the West, were easy to persuade. By the end of the decade the Germans were supplying Israel with arms and buying Uzis.

Ben-Gurion's accommodation with Germany was unpopular but pragmatic: Nazism had been defeated and the state needed all the help it could get. But – partly to sell his dealings with the Germans – he also promoted the 'Nazification' of the Arabs in the Israeli imagination. Defending the restitution agreement to an audience of survivors, he said: 'We don't want to reach again the situation that you were in. We do not want the Arab Nazis to come and slaughter us.' To his cabinet, however, Ben-Gurion admitted that Arab hostility grew out of the fact that 'hundreds of thousands of refugees have been expelled from their homes.' The refugees were 'the source of all evil', and now many of them were trying to return, sometimes carrying out attacks against Jews living near the border. Ben-Gurion's policy on the border attacks was to respond with overwhelming force: the 'preventative war and pre-emptive strike' doctrine. A bit of tension on the border was no bad thing; nor was war, so long as it occurred at a time of Israel's choosing.

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In October 1953, Palestinian guerrillas crossed into Israel from Jordan and hurled a grenade into a house, killing a Turkish immigrant and her two children. Unit 101, a special forces team commanded by Ariel Sharon, was given instructions to launch a raid inside Jordan and inflict maximal casualties and property damage. They planted explosives in dozens of homes in the village of Qibya in the West Bank (then under Jordanian control), killing about seventy villagers. Ben-Gurion claimed that the attack had been carried out by 'Jews from the Arab countries or survivors of the Nazi concentration camps', but afterwards he was reportedly 'glowing' with pride. Ben-Gurion presented Sharon with a Czech rifle from the 1948 war, still covered in grease.

After the raid, Ben-Gurion retired for a spell, moving back to the agricultural collective of Sde Boker in the Negev, where his first job was to shovel manure. His wife, who had been happy in Tel Aviv, hated it. He thanked her for 'how you followed me in the wilderness in a land now sown', a quote from the Book of Jeremiah. ('What does he think, that he's Tolstoy?' she said.) A year later he was back in power, first as defence minister, then again as prime minister, pursuing an increasingly dangerous game of brinksmanship on the border with Nasser and the Syrians. The IDF had come to believe that Israel needed to enlarge its territory in order to accommodate its growing population, and recommended 'thinning out' the Arab population 'by means of evacuation or transfer'. Israel's responses to the border attacks became increasingly provocative. In November 1955, Operation Volcano left eighty Egyptians and six Israelis dead. Moshe Dayan, the IDF chief of staff, begged Ben-Gurion for permission to seize the Gaza Strip and the island of Tiran, which had a strategically important location at the mouth of the Gulf of Aqaba. Ben-Gurion wasn't yet ready for war but he, too, had his eye on Tiran, which he believed to be the ancient Hebrew province of Yotvat (based on his reading of Procopius of Caesarea, a sixth-century Byzantine

historian).

When Nasser announced the nationalisation of the Suez Canal on 26 July 1956, Ben-Gurion and Dayan joined forces with France and the UK to overthrow Nasser (a ‘new Hitler’, Ben-Gurion said) and create a ‘new Middle East’. Once Nasser was removed, Israel would take over the West Bank and resettle the Palestinians in the eastern part of Jordan, which would be handed over to Iraq. Israel would also annex parts of Syria. As for Gaza, Ben-Gurion said: ‘If I believed in miracles, I’d wish for it to be swallowed up by the sea.’

It took only four days for the Israelis to capture Tiran and the entire Sinai Peninsula. Three months later they were forced under American pressure to evacuate the Sinai, but Ben-Gurion exulted in their hour of glory, which, he bragged in the Knesset, had returned the Jews to the place where they had received the Torah. ‘You have extended a hand to King Solomon,’ Ben-Gurion told the troops in Sharm el-Sheikh. Meanwhile, nearly fifty Palestinian civilians in the village of Kafr Qasim, near the Jordanian border, had just been murdered by IDF troops for violating a curfew. The curfew had been moved forward by half an hour, but no one had told the villagers at work in the fields. ‘The soldiers are not guilty,’ Ben-Gurion said. ‘They receive orders.’ The chief perpetrators were sentenced to terms of up to 17 years, but three years later all of them had walked free. Shocking though it was, the massacre was a predictable consequence of treating the state’s Palestinian citizens as enemies. They lived under a repressive military government that limited their freedom of movement and helped itself to parts of their land. Ben-Gurion worried that if the Palestinian citizens of Israel could move freely, ‘those 600,000 or more refugees living on our borders will cross the border and enter the villages that have emptied.’ In public, he said that ‘keeping them isolated’ was for their own good, ‘just like the first reservations set up for Native Americans in the United States’.

In the late 1950s, Ben-Gurion came to resemble an ‘Israeli King Lear’, in Segev’s words, ‘spiteful and cantankerous, resentful and insufferable’. He fell prey to faith healers and crackpots, made wild predictions about the future settlement of Mars and the moon, and developed an obsession with clearing his name in the endless investigation of a series of botched operations conducted by Mossad agents inside Iraq and Egypt. He stepped down as prime minister in 1963 and left Mapai. The new party he formed in 1965, Rafi, never amounted to much. But his last decade in politics presented something more than the spectacle of an old man’s decline. With the trial of Adolf Eichmann in 1961 he made one of the most important decisions of his political career. The goal of the trial was not so much to prove Eichmann’s guilt as – in Segev’s words – to bond Israeli Jews together ‘by means of an emotionally formative, sweeping, and unifying experience around a common catastrophe’. It represented a marked shift for Ben-Gurion, who had always grounded the Zionist claim to Palestine in the Bible, not in the diaspora’s history of persecution. After the Eichmann trial the Holocaust would increasingly supply the state with a narrative to justify its policies, especially vis-à-vis the ‘Arab Nazis’. In effect, the Jewish state would ‘Israelise’ the Holocaust, much as it would conquer and ‘Judaise’ the land.

A similar blend of catastrophism and strategic calculation governed Ben-Gurion’s pursuit of atomic weapons at Dimona in the Negev, built with French assistance but in defiance of the Americans he had always been keen to woo. Segev suggests that Ben-Gurion would have been prepared to back off on his nuclear programme if the US had done more to guarantee Israel’s security: in 1963, after Egypt, Iraq and Syria formed the United Arab Republic and proclaimed the ‘liberation of Palestine’ as one of its goals, Ben-Gurion wrote to President Kennedy requesting that he make a joint declaration with Khrushchev ‘guaranteeing the integrity of all the countries of the Middle East’; he knew the Arabs, he said, and ‘they are capable of following the Nazi example.’ As with his request to the British to extend the Mandate, Ben-Gurion continued to believe that no matter how strong Israel was, it needed a superpower sponsor. Kennedy rejected his proposal in a ‘chilly, almost sarcastic’ letter and the Dimona project went forward in complete secrecy.

Ben-Gurion’s most significant political intervention in the years after leaving office was to criticise Levi Eshkol’s launching of the 1967 war. In the sabre-rattling leading up to Israel’s attack on Egypt, Jordan and Syria in June, Nasser had closed the Straits of Tiran to Israeli shipping, but Ben-Gurion didn’t think Nasser’s move justified a pre-emptive strike. ‘Nasser won’t do anything, because he’s satisfied with having closed the Straits,’ he said; there was no need to ‘fight like David fought Goliath’. Liberal Zionists often try to enlist Ben-Gurion to their cause by quoting his remark that ‘if I had to choose between a small Israel with peace and a large Israel without peace, I would prefer a small Israel.’ But he didn’t really think peace was possible, and he always had

his eye on expansion. After the war, he recommended withdrawing from the Sinai as part of a peace treaty with Egypt, and from the Golan as part of a peace treaty with Syria. But he proposed keeping Gaza and turning the West Bank into an 'autonomous entity' where Gazan refugees would be resettled. He also pushed for settling more Jews in East Jerusalem, as if to atone for his decision not to conquer the Old City in 1948. And once he visited the Golan, he said Israel should never leave it, 'even in exchange for a peace treaty'. As Segev writes, 'he had always dreamed of possessing the entire Land of Israel, and that continued to be his ultimate wish.'

Even those who believe that Ben-Gurion's triumph has been a disaster for the Middle East will find it hard not to be impressed by his mastery of state-building, his determination to 'know everything and not to neglect even the tiniest detail', his indifference to the spoils of power. (His only infraction against the state treasury was his extravagant book-buying.) It's no wonder that Israeli Jews have been nostalgic for this sort of leadership recently, under a prime minister whose time in office seems to have been devoted to evading charges of corruption. A politician of the right and champion of American capitalism who luxuriates in the company of billionaires (and in their gifts), Benjamin Netanyahu seems to present the starkest possible contrast to the country's socialist founder. But as Segev shows, Ben-Gurion's differences with the right were more a matter of tactics than principle. Like Netanyahu, he sought a Greater Israel, even if he believed it had to be pursued in stages. The Revisionist leader Ze'ev Jabotinsky invented the concept of an 'iron wall of Jewish bayonets' between Israel and the Arabs, but it was Ben-Gurion who built it.

Ben-Gurion died in 1973. He left behind a dynamic and prosperous state, significantly larger and better defended than at the dawn of independence. The Jews of the Yishuv, thanks in great part to him, had been turned into a Hebrew-speaking nation. But he worried that there were still too many Arabs and that the Jews were becoming more religious, and less 'Israeli'. The pioneer spirit of the 'new Jews' of the First and Second Aliyahs could be periodically reignited by war and settlement but never permanently sustained. Even Ben-Gurion found it difficult to maintain the 'Zionist faith'. In the final year of his life he let down his guard in evoking his native land: Poland. Of his visits to Płońsk, Ben-Gurion, who never shed his Yiddish accent, said that he was 'coming home'. He wasn't even sure he was a Zionist and had 'doubts about whether the word has any meaning at all'. Still, he continued to insist that Jews had a duty to settle in Israel, and it frustrated him that American Jews refused to follow what he called the 'Zionist commandments', even if he grudgingly accepted that Israel depended on their financial and political support. When a philanthropist proudly told him that he'd named his vacation home outside Chicago 'Palestine', Ben-Gurion responded: 'Why don't you have a summer house in Tel Aviv and call it Chicago?'

The answer hasn't changed: most Jews in America prefer to live in the diaspora and do not consider their lives 'abnormal'. Few of them worry that another catastrophe is just around the corner, and an increasing number are aghast to see Israel lording it over an occupied people and allying itself with a white nationalist American president. Some have concluded that Israel's oppressive behaviour toward the Palestinians fans the very antisemitism against which it claims to be a defence. For liberal Jews raised to think of Ben-Gurion as a grouchy but well-meaning patriarch, Segev's biography will be particularly disillusioning, since he shows how central exclusionary nationalism, war and racism were to Ben-Gurion's vision of the Jewish homeland in Palestine, and how contemptuous he was not only of the Arabs but of Jewish life outside Zion. They may look at the state that Ben-Gurion built, and ask if the cost has been worth it.

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