THE MAKING OF MODERN ZIONISM

The Intellectual Origins of the Jewish State

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CHAPTER 17

Ben Gurion: The Vision and the Power

DAVID BEN GURION (1886–1973) was a man of contradictions: a socialist, who in the 1920s wished to adopt Soviet models for the organization of Jewish labor in Palestine, yet, after the establishment of Israel, found himself identified with its army and hailed as a military leader; a social and economic thinker, who as the first Secretary of the Histadruth Labor Federation laid the foundations for its economic power, yet as Prime Minister always enjoyed saying that he did not understand economics; a contentious man, always quarreling with his friends as much as with his opponents, who came to symbolize the unity of the people of Israel; and an avowed agnostic, who nonetheless frequently quoted the Bible and forged the political coalition between Labor and religious Zionism, which became the basis for the Israeli political system until 1977. He was a self-taught student of philosophy, immersed in Plato and Buddha, whose sartorial tastes in a crucial period of his life as Minister of Defense focused on uniformlike khaki; he was a political leader always surrounded by hosts of admirers, who left no successor worthy of his name. He realized the Zionist dream of Jewish sovereignty, but quarreled after 1948 with the Zionist leadership and called for the dissolution of the Zionist movement after the State of Israel had been established. Ben Gurion was the most charismatic leader of Israel's largest Labor party, who was, however,

thrown out of his own party a few years before his death by controversial quasi-legal proceedings.

Ben Gurion was a much-glorified military leader whose strident rhetoric sometimes verged on the arrogant, he was, however, filled with existential fears about the destiny of the State of Israel. Yet behind the tough facade of aggressiveness in his public rhetoric, which coined such controversial phrases as "What matters is not what the Gentiles say, but what the Jews do," or "UNO-Shmuno," can easily be discerned a complex personality, extremely sensitive to the weaknesses of the Jewish people even in its own state, much aware of its surrounding dangers against whom it will never be able to fight without the support of outside powers. It was this complexity that was responsible for his unique blend of aggressive rhetoric and extremely cautious politics.

Only a detailed biography can do justice to such a person and to his historical contribution.[1] Yet all the vicissitudes of Ben Gurion's political career contain elements of continuity in the basic tenets directing his policies. Although he was never a systematic thinker, distinct traits stand out in his writings and actions. To a very large extent, the State of Israel, with its achievements and failures, is a mirror as well as a monument to Ben Gurion's own achievements and failures, and no history of Israel can be written without focusing on the dominant role played by him, for better or for worse, in its development.

For anyone looking for the theoretical foundations of Ben Gurion's Zionist thought, they can be encapsulated in two principles: first, Zionism is a revolt against Jewish tradition; second, to carry out this revolution, it will not suffice to announce it, but one has to seek the social subject able to carry it out. This historical subject Ben Gurion finds in the Labor movement and its practical activity in creating the social infrastructure for a Jewish society in Palestine. To this, Ben Gurion always added the necessity of finding an adequate political power within whose context Zionism could become a reality. This calls for a cool identification of the power structures active in the international arena. Such forces are dependent on the changing diplomatic and strategic fortunes of the Great Powers, and the Zionist movement (as well as the State of Israel) would always need to have an adequate reading of that scene. Otherwise, Zionism and Israel might find themselves isolated and pitted against stronger, richer, and more ruthless antagonists.

The idea that Zionism is a revolt against the continuity of Jewish history has been voiced by many who preceded Ben Gurion. But he expresses this recognition in a most pronounced way. In a series of articles included in the volume *From Class to Nation* (1933), this is reiterated time and again:

> The very realization of Zionism is nothing else than carrying out this deep historical transformation occurring in the life of the Hebrew people. This transformation does not limit itself to its geographical aspect, to the movement of Jewish masses from the countries of the Diaspora to the renascent homeland —but in a socioeconomic transformation as well: it means taking masses of uprooted, impoverished, sterile Jewish masses, living parasitically off the body of an alien economic body and dependent on others—and introducing them to productive and creative life, implanting them on the land, integrating them into primary production in agriculture, in industry and handicraft—and making them economically independent and self-sufficient.[2]

Or in another instance:

> Zionism in its essence is a revolutionary movement. One could hardly find a revolution that goes deeper than what Zionism wants to do to the life of the Hebrew people. This is not merely a revolution of the political and economic structure—but a revolution of the very foundations of the personal lives of the members of the people. The very essence of Zionist thinking about the life of the Jewish people and on Hebrew history is basically revolutionary—it is a revolt against a tradition of many centuries, helplessly longing for redemption. Instead of these sterile and bloodless longings, we substitute a will for realization, an attempt at reconstruction and creativity on the soil of the homeland. Instead of a people dependent on others, instead of a minority living at the mercy of a majority, we call for a self-sufficient people, master of its own fate. Instead of a corrupt existence of middlemen, hung-up in mid-air, we call for an independent existence of a working people, at home on the soil and in a creative economy.[3]

The essence of this revolution is, then, not merely geographical, immigration to the Land of Israel—but it requires an overall restructuring of the Jewish socioeconomic fabric. A Zionist movement that would be satisfied with the creation in Palestine of a Jewish society that replicates the traditional Jewish occupations in Plonsk, Brisk, or Warsaw will be doomed to failure. Jewish political independence in Palestine will never be established unless preceded by Jewish economic independence there

—that is, by the creation of a self-sufficient Jewish community in Palestine, not dependent on the labor of others and controlling its own economic structure. The reverse is also true. A Jewish society created in Palestine, not economically independent, but dependent on donations from abroad and internally dependent on non-Jewish labor, will be doomed to lose its political independence as well. Ben Gurion's materialist conception of history, derived as it was from the somewhat simplistic Marxist materialism of Poalei Zion, always returned to this cruel underlying truth: there is no political power without economic power. In the Zionist context this meant that without a Jewish economy, there can be no Jewish state.

From this followed the struggle for ensuring that the Jewish economic enterprises in Palestine would be based on Jewish, not Arab, labor. This was an insistence not always understood, and rarely welcomed, by the European socialist sister-parties of the Zionist labor movement. But before the eyes of the pioneers of the Second Aliyah, there was always the fate of the first settlers of the First Aliyah. The first settlements attempted to create a class of Jewish peasants, but they slowly introduced Arab labor and before too long Jewish latifundia, exploiting Arab labor, emerged. Without the insistence on Jewish labor, Ben Gurion argued, such attempts might result in the creation of a class of Jewish *effendis* and *colons* in the Middle East. But a Jewish nation would not emerge from such an experiment.

Ben Gurion was deeply aware that the transition to physical labor in Palestine could be even more difficult than the very act of immigration itself. It is from this that he develops his views about the centrality of the working class in the Zionist renaissance and the necessity to spread the newcomers all over the country and not limit Jewish immigration to a few urban centers.

According to Ben Gurion, this transition to all aspects of primary production would call for a move from urban to agricultural occupations. In the Diaspora, the Jews became an urban people, severed from agricultural life and immediate production, and the Zionist revolution has to re-order this aspect of Jewish life as well. Decentralizing the Jewish population of Israel and spreading it all over the country, particularly to the Negev, became one of Ben Gurion's obsessions as prime minister. Yet the roots for this view can be found in a much earlier realization of the nexus between economic base, social structure, and strategic power. In 1935, in

an article called "Our Action and Our Direction," Ben Gurion argues against those in the Zionist movement, mainly the Revisionists, who belittle the importance of establishing new agricultural settlements. Evoking a slightly surprising historical example, Ben Gurion argues for the importance of creating a social and economic infrastructure for the Jewish community in Palestine:

> World history recalls one frightening example which should be a lesson to us. Anyone who has learned Roman history remembers the drastic chapter called the Punic Wars. In our language we should say the Canaanite Wars. Once there was a great Canaanite military leader, from a stock close to the ancient Hebrews. He had a Hebrew name and a Hebrew title: Hannibal, the Judge from Qeret Hadath [Carthage]. He was one of the greatest military leaders of all times, perhaps the greatest of them all, and he fought against the young Roman state. He showed marvelous feats. He headed an army of mercenaries, made up of various tribes and races, and he led them from North Africa to Italy, through the Alps, and created havoc in the Roman camp. Against him was pitted a large Roman army, larger than his own, and he defeated them time and again.
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> Yet ultimately all his heroism and all his military and political genius did not sustain him—and he was not only a strategic genius, but also a statesman of genius. Eventually he was defeated, despite the fact that his adversaries were rather mediocre generals with no talent. Roman mediocrity defeated Canaanite genius. For Carthage was a *city-state,* whereas Rome was a *village-state,* and in the desperate conflict between a city-people and a village-people, the village-people proved victorious, and all the commercial wealth of Carthage and the ingenuity of its military leaders were to no avail. Hannibal's heroism was broken by the obstinate warfare of the Roman peasants. These peasants were not taken aback by the successive defeats inflicted on them—because they were integrated into their soil and tied to their land. And they overcame Carthage and wiped it off the face of the earth without leaving a trace.[4]

For all the centrality Ben Gurion accords to the working class, his analysis is far from that of an orthodox Marxist. For him, no class war is at the center of his thought, especially as he realizes that the anomaly of the Jewish people was its lack of a viable working class. For Ben Gurion, Zionist socialism does not mean the hegemony of the working class but the creation of a Jewish working class through emigration and settlement of the Land of Israel. Since the creation of such a working class is to Ben Gurion the social expression of the Zionist revolution—a revolution that will recreate for the Jewish people its productive economic base and enable it to rely on its own labor—he views the "class function" and the

"national function" of the Jewish proletariat in Palestine as merely two different aspects of the same historical phenomenon.

This also leads Ben Gurion to maintain that in the long run the outcome of the Zionist endeavor will depend on the productive infrastructure in Palestine, not on the Zionist associations in the Diaspora. The changing and revolutionary reality in Palestine is the focus of Zionism, not Zionist organizational activity abroad. Even before World War I, Ben Gurion wrote in the journal *Ha'ahdut,* published in Jerusalem by Poalei Zion, that the destiny of Zionism will ultimately be decided neither by the World Zionist Organization nor by the worldwide political and diplomatic efforts of Zionism. The outcome will be decided "here, in the Land of the Turk" [*'Kan, be-Tugarma'*]—in the Ottoman Empire, in Palestine.

On the face of it, this is utopian and pretentious: that the future of Zionism will be determined in the Land of Israel, whose Jewish population numbered at that time less than one hundred thousand people and whose new pioneering population amounted to a few thousand, that such a minuscule Yishuv will determine the fate of the nation—and not what the Jewish people in the Diaspora will do, with all its wealthy, well-educated, and diplomatically and politically influential Jews—this was really hubris and *chutzpah.* On the other hand, such an unorthodox approach truly understood the nature and source of real Zionist strength.

For the focus of this strength was the social praxis changing the nature of Palestine and with it the nature of the Jewish people, and this praxis was happening "here, in the Land of the Turk." This was Ben Gurion's great practical achievement—first as secretary of the Histadruth and later in the Zionist Executive. He was the first to grasp the meaning of the shift from Zionist *activity* in the Diaspora to Zionist *reality* in the Land of Israel. The Holocaust finally stamped the realization of this shift on general public opinion, but many decades earlier, it was Ben Gurion who first gave this shift its practical and normative centrality.

The consequence of this all is fairly simple. Political power has to reside where real social praxis is being carried out. Just as the center moves from Diaspora Zionism to Zionist reality in Palestine, so hegemony in the Zionist movement should pass from the middle-class, quasi-philanthropic Zionist leadership in the West to the leadership of the Zionist Labor movement in Palestine. Ben Gurion's election to head the Jewish Agency and the Zionist Executive in Jerusalem in the 1930s signifies this double shift: from the Diaspora to Palestine, from bourgeois Zionism to the Labor movement.

For Ben Gurion, bourgeois Zionism, which continues in Palestine the same modes of Jewish existence as those that prevailed in the Diaspora, cannot become the basis for the Zionist revolution. The Labor movement is made up of people who, on emigrating to Palestine, have *changed* the structure of their existence, consciously becoming workers and farmers and thus rejecting their middle-class origins in Europe. Each Zionist pioneer who left his bourgeois background in Europe in order to engage in primary production in Palestine has carried out a far-reaching personal transformation. Such a transformation, when viewed collectively, becomes the infrastructure for the social transformation of the whole Jewish people. A middle-class merchant or intellectual who on emigrating to Palestine continues to do what he had been doing abroad just extends the traditional modes of Jewish existence from the Diaspora. By replicating Diaspora structures, the Zionist revolution will not be carried out. The Jewish nascent working class in Palestine, consciously created by middle-class immigrants convinced of the necessity of making themselves into proletarians, is to Ben Gurion the truly "national class" in the sense used by Marx when he wrote that the universal, national class is the class whose interests "must genuinely be the aims and interests of society itself, of which it becomes in reality the social head and heart."[5]

For this reason Ben Gurion does not see Zionism and socialism as two separate elements merely welded together historically in the phenomenon of Labor Zionism. They are two sides of the same coin, permanently joined to each other in the crucible of the Zionist revolutionary experience. In his speech at the opening of the convention of the Mapai (the Labor Party) in 1950, Ben Gurion reiterated the same formula used by him decades earlier:

> Socialist Zionism is not an artificial aggregation or a mechanical combination of two separate visions and wills, Zionism on one hand and socialism on the other. . . . Neither Zionism nor socialism come to us from the outside; they originate in the will and the urges of the person who lives by his own labour. . . . The terms Zionism and socialism are but two different expressions and manifestations of the same praxis: the creative praxis of the working Jewish person and his vision, aiming at moulding national and general human life according to his own image; for only an image of a creative society of workers, free and enjoying equal rights, can guarantee independence, liberty and equality to all members of the Jewish people and all the nations of the world.[6]

In *From Class to Nation* Ben Gurion insists that only socialist Zionism is pure Zionism, all other forms, to him, having been adulterated by other elements:

> Socialist Zionism does not mean Zionism alloyed with anything else which does not organically belong to Zionism; on the contrary, socialist Zionism is distinct from other forms of Zionism precisely by being not mixed with foreign alloys. . . . Socialist Zionism means a full Zionism, distilling into itself all the historical contents of the redemption of the Jewish people without any condition or afterthought, without any compromise or concession. This is a sort of Zionism which will not be content with redeeming only a part of the people, but aims at the complete redemption of all the people of Israel: this is a sort of Zionism which envisages the Land of Israel as a homeland not only for a few privileged and wealthy but wants it to be a homeland for every Jew who returns there—a homeland that equally provides for all her children, revives them, makes them into citizens and redeems all of them without discrimination.[7]

In another essay included in *From Class to Nation* Ben Gurion spells out the constructive, society-building role of the Labor movement in the Jewish community in Palestine:

> The Hebrew worker came here not as a refugee, clutching at any reed offered to him. He came as a representative of the whole people, and as an avant-guarde pioneer in the grand enterprise of the Hebrew revolution did he capture his position in the labour market, in the economy, and in settlement activities. In all his deeds and activities, be they small or large, in his work in village and town, in the creation of his own agricultural and industrial economic structures, in conquering language and culture, in defense, in fighting for his interests at work, in satisfying his class interests and his national interests, in the creation of his institutions and the building of his *Histadruth*—in all this the Jewish worker was conscious of the historical task destined to be carried out by the working class, preparing the revolution which would make labour and work into the dominant elements in the life of the country and the people. The Hebrew worker combined in his life work national redemption and class war, and in his class organization created the content of the historical aims and needs of the Jewish people.[8]

Ben Gurion tried to encapsulate these ideas in the slogan "From Class to Nation." The extreme left wing of socialist Zionism, grouped in the Poalei Zion-Left movement, saw socialist Zionism as a vehicle for the realization of the proletarian revolution in the Jewish context. Ben Gu-

rion, on the other hand, realized that in the Jewish context the first task is the very *creation* of a Jewish working class, and according to him such a Jewish working class could be created only through the Zionist effort itself in the process of settling Palestine. Left-wing socialist Zionism advocated class warfare within the nascent Jewish population in Palestine; Ben Gurion and his movement realized how sterile and mechanistic such an adaptation of the concepts of class warfare would be to the conditions of the minuscule Jewish population in Palestine. How can a working class that does not yet exist emancipate itself from the fetters of a capitalist bourgeoisie which itself hardly exists? For this reason Ben Gurion did not advocate class warfare in the 1920s and 1930s but called for "constructive socialism"— a socialism that would create in the Land of Israel a nation through building its economic infrastructure along public and cooperative lines. In such an economy, publicly directed and controlled, the Jewish working class and its political representatives would naturally become the hegemonic factor. Not through class warfare, but through creating its own economy, would the emergent Jewish working class become the dominant influence in the new homeland of the Jewish people.

In 1931, a year after the establishment of the Mapai Labor Party, Ben Gurion writes in the party weekly, *Hapoel Hatzair*:

> Our movement has always maintained the socialist idea that the party of the working class, unlike the parties of other classes, is not merely a class party, caring only for class interests, but is also a national party, responsible for the future of the entire nation and viewing itself not just as a particular party, but as the nucleus of the future nation. In this [Zionist] Congress, this idea became political reality. The Labor movement, which fifteen years ago hardly existed as a visible entity, has today become a corner-stone of Zionism, qualitatively and quantitatively: we have become the largest faction, directing and deciding the fortunes [of the whole Zionist movement]. What has happened a few months ago at the Representative Assembly [of the Jewish community in Palestine] has now been repeated at the [Zionist] Congress. In the Land of Israel we are turning from a party to a mainstay of the community.[9]

Once the Labor movement became hegemonic in the Zionist movement because of its central position in the infrastructure of the Yishuv, Ben Gurion turns to broadening the base of its power through a coalition with other elements within the Zionist movement which are not necessarily identified with the liberal, bourgeois General Zionists. In the same

article Ben Gurion calls for Labor to become a focus for "the toiling circles of the Eastern communities, especially the Yemenites, the craftsmen, clerks and free professions, small farmers and shopkeepers who do not exploit the labor of others." This is a true profile of the wide social base of Mapai in Palestine and Israel at the height of its power.

Ben Gurion's position has a paradoxical element in it. On one hand, his insistence on "constructive" socialism rather than on a Marxist model of class warfare distinguished him from the more doctrinaire attitudes of the left wing of socialist Zionism; on the other hand, his strategy has some very distinct Leninist elements in it. Lenin's main innovation in his polemic against the Social Democratic Mensheviks was his insistence that in the conditions of Russia, the power of a revolutionary socialist elite will precede the full-fledged development of a capitalist system in Russia and the mature development of a working class there. Under Russian conditions that meant a violent revolution based ultimately on repression and terror. In a way, Ben Gurion's position was in a way similar. He maintained that the strategy of the Zionist Labor movement could not be gradual and could not wait until a capitalist economy developed in Palestine to try to overturn it through class warfare.

Precisely because Jewish Palestine, just like Russia, did not yet possess a fully developed capitalist system and hence had no widespread working class in the country, the Labor movement could become hegemonic through a dialectical leap. In Russia it may mean an elitist dictatorship, in Palestine its course would be different—identifying the Labor movement with the general national aims and thus turning it into a hegemonic power in the emergent economy and society. Making the Histadruth central to the creation of a cooperative economy in the country would turn it into a much stronger force than the feeble private sector, always split among numerous individual proprietors. Since the Jewish community in Palestine before 1948 lacked coercive state power and was necessarily based on the voluntary association inherent in the Zionist movement, Ben Gurion's elitist notions did not lead to anything as oppressive as a Leninist dictatorship. In the context of the Yishuv and the Zionist movement, this created the basis for Labor to achieve a parliamentary majority in the Zionist congresses and helped the Labor movement channel Jewish contributions from abroad, coming mainly from middle-class Jews, into cooperative and collective socialist enterprises in Palestine and later in Israel. Socialist Zionists never had to expropriate by force the property of the

bourgeoisie, for there hardly existed a significant Jewish bourgeoisie in Palestine at that time. But Labor's control of the Zionist movement helped to transfer money from Jewish bourgeois sources in the Diaspora to socialist enterprises in the Land of Israel which were central to the national aims of the Zionist movement. Thus a unique coalition was forged between the leaders of socialist Zionism in the Land of Israel, headed by Ben Gurion, and significant sectors of the Jewish community abroad, notably in the United States. As a result the real strength of the Labor movement in Israel has always been much greater than its mere numerical showing in parliamentary elections. It became the real Establishment of Israeli society and still retains much of its power even after losing in the 1977 parliamentary elections.

This may also explain the interest Ben Gurion himself showed in the Soviet experience. As secretary of the Histadruth, Ben Gurion traveled to the Soviet Union in the 1920s, ostensibly to visit an agricultural exhibition, and his visit raised many eyebrows in the Zionist movement. Ben Gurion's visit was not motivated by any admiration for the Soviet system, which he detested and combated politically throughout his life; nor was he so naive, as the Webbs have been, to be taken in by the more obvious Soviet successes while overlooking the abhorrent nature of the system as a whole. Yet for Ben Gurion, Soviet Russia was a challenge. As in Zionism, a social revolution was consciously undertaken, which drastically changed the whole social structure of the nation. True, in the Soviet context it was based on coercive state power, while in the Zionist case it was based on voluntary affiliation and immigration. Nonetheless, some of the problems were the same. How does an avant-garde elite succeed in changing long and well-entrenched social, economic, and cultural structures? How does such a change take place? What are the material and spiritual forces sustaining it? The new Soviet culture fascinated Ben Gurion not because of its contents nor because he wanted to emulate its values. It was its morphology and its mechanisms that he wanted to study. Here the whole fabric of national life was being changed, perhaps for the first time in history. And this is what Zionism had set as its revolutionary task.

When Ben Gurion said, "Socialism is not only an end, but also the means through which Zionism will be realized," he announced the unity of means and ends that characterized the realistic approach undertaken

by him as a political strategist. Ben Gurion realized that the methods through which states are established are also the methods through which they will be governed. If the Land of Israel is built by private enterprise employing Arab labor, a Jewish colonial society will be established in the Middle East. If, on the other hand, the Zionist homeland is established through collective and nationally controlled funds and with Jewish labor, then the nature of the state that will thus emerge would also be collectively and socially oriented. The social class that will be seminal in establishing a Jewish society in Palestine will also be, eventually, its hegemonic force. Ben Gurion was thus able to combine his insistence on the ideological structures of socialist Zionism with a harshly realistic political infighting within the Zionist movement. Hence his alliance with the petit bourgeoisie of artisans and small shopkeepers was to forestall a right-wing majority; his coalition with religious Zionism (and the price he was ready to pay for this) was to forestall the creation of a joint Revisionist-national religious coalition of the sort that came to power in 1977. His ruthless partisan fight was against the extreme left in socialist Zionism (called first the Poalei Zion-Left, and in the 1950s the unified Mapam), against its doctrinaire views about the centrality of class war, which he found utterly irrelevant in a society still creating its classes, especially its working class, from the truncated social structure of Jewish life in the Diaspora.

For with all his polemic against doctrinaire Marxism, Ben Gurion always realized the prime importance of economic infrastructures; without them, there is no political power. This was the basis of his violent opposition to Revisionist Zionism as expressed by Jabotinsky. He maintained that stressing maximalist political and military aims without a firm foundation in the country and without real allies leads to empty rhetoric and to strategic and political weakness. Spectacular feats may be achieved in this way, but a sustained national effort cannot be achieved through such a combination. On the internal scene this was proved in 1948 on two levels. It was the Haganah, with its social infrastructure in hundreds of Jewish settlements all over the country and sustained by the collective enterprises of the Histadruth, which was able to repel the Arab military onslaught. The Irgun and the Stern groups, for all their fervor and idealism, were not able to do it. Conversely, the relative ease with which Ben Gurion and the Haganah overcame the internal military threat of the Irgun and the Stern groups also bore out his analysis about the social roots of political power.

Ben Gurion's insistence on the self-supporting nature of a Jewish community in the Land of Israel somehow became dissipated over the years under the impact of the terrible realities of nazism and the Holocaust. Before the rise of the Nazis, Ben Gurion and the Labor movement preferred selective immigration to Palestine, focused on pioneers who would be educated to a new life based on labor awaiting them in the new land. After 1933 and certainly after 1945, there was no way to maintain such a *halutzic,* avant-garde, and elitist concept. When hundreds of thousands of survivors tried to reach the country after 1945, there was no way to select or educate them prior to their immigration. Similarly, when the establishment of Israel in 1948 and its wars with the Arab countries made the existence of Jewish communities in the Arab world precarious, if not altogether impossible, there was no way to stem the tide of a massive Ingathering of the Exiles. The consequence was a drastic change in the social structure of Israeli society. Newcomers had to be educated to the realities of the Zionist revolution *after* immigration, and it was only natural that such a massive educational effort was far from successful, given the constraints under which Israel then had to operate.

A similar shift occurred in the structure of the financial aid flowing from world Jewry and other external forces to Israel. Before World War II, Ben Gurion's movement was adamant that all Jewish contributions to the Zionist effort should be channeled to constructing the social and productive infrastructure of the new society, not for direct consumption. Mass immigration after 1948 made it necessary to find enormous funds for the daily and immediate upkeep of masses of new immigrants, and slowly the distinction between investment and immediate consumption became blurred. The enormous defense burdens of Israel, proportionally larger than those of any other nation at present, meant creating another link of dependence on external forces, very much against the initial socialist Zionist idea of self-reliance. It is no wonder that after 1948 Ben Gurion could not easily sustain many of his original positions, and a certain sense of gloom and desperation crept into his vision. The Zionist dream did become reality, but Ben Gurion, for all his glorifying the re-emergence of Israel and its military strength, was more aware than many others how different was the realization of that dream from the original vision.

Ben Gurion's views about the international context in which Zionism must act were similarly characterized by a sober, and sometimes cruel,

realism. The tough rhetoric used during his prime ministership notwithstanding, Ben Gurion understood very well that in any international equation—be it regional or global—the Jewish people will always be the weaker part. This harsh truth never left him even after the establishment of the Jewish state and its spectacular military feats. In the David-Goliath equation, Ben Gurion always knew Israel was the perpetual David, and never (perhaps with the exception of a few days after the Sinai campaign of 1956) did this sobriety leave him. He realized that for all its military accomplishments, Israel's defensive capability was not autonomous, but financially and politically dependent on outside sources, that Israel would always need allies and should never maneuver itself into a war situation without such support. Yet he also knew that such outside support would always be contingent and conditional, and that in the long run, for Israel there would be no constant allies.

During the British Mandate, Ben Gurion rejected the doctrinaire views of the Zionist extreme left which condemned any cooperation between the Zionist movement and imperial Britain. As a socialist Ben Gurion realized the ideological difficulties inherent in such cooperation; yet he remained convinced that no other outside element could give Zionism similar support. On the other hand, he equally rejected the uncritical enthusiasm for Britain and the British Empire expressed by the Revisionists, who envisaged a basic alliance between Zionism and the British Empire. Ben Gurion maintained that this was wishful thinking; British interests in the Middle East were much too complex to allow Britain's uncritical support of the Zionist movement. For Ben Gurion, cooperation with Britain was always pragmatic, not ideological. At the outbreak of World War II he was able to express his complex attitude most succinctly, when he said, "Let us fight against Hitler as if we had no differences with the British, and let us continue our political struggle against Britain as if there were no war against Hitler." Less sophisticated and less subtle minds were not able to follow such a strategy.

In an article written in 1936, "Our Balance Sheet with the English," he expressed this critical assessment of the link with Britain:

> England allowed 350,000 Jews into the country. She built a harbour at Haifa, and Haifa became a city with a Jewish majority. She built roads connecting the Jewish settlements, and she supported, albeit not sufficiently, Jewish industry. The English are not a nation of angels, and I know only too well the

terrible things done by them in Ireland and other places; but the English have also done many positive things in the countries under their rule. They are a great nation, with a rich culture, and not a people of exploiters and robbers. And to us, the English were far from being just bad. They recognised our historical right to this country—they were the first to do so—proclaimed our language an official language, permitted a large-scale immigration—and if we are to judge, let us judge justly and fairly.[10]

It was in a similar vein that Ben Gurion addressed himself to the no-less complex problem of Israel's relation to the United States after 1948. Here again, his sobriety and realism stand out. He rejects, on one hand, Mapam's ideological pro-Soviet anti-Americanism, yet does not fall into the opposite pitfall of believing that Israel could ever achieve a full identity of interests with the United States. Contrary to those who, during Ben Gurion's own lifetime and later on, tried to explain how the interests of Israel and the United States were fully identical and therefore the United States should know it had no better ally in the Middle East than Israel, Ben Gurion always realized that such simplistic views would not help Israel in forging what could be a pragmatic, yet limited, community of interests with America. He pointed out that occasionally Israel would have to use American public opinion judiciously to move the United States administration to a more friendly attitude toward Israel. In an article called "Our Foreign Policy" Ben Gurion formulated views in 1951 that remain relevant until this very day:

American assistance to Israel is the outcome of the sympathy of the American people toward us, and only if we shall know how to maintain relations of friendship and trust between ourselves and the American people will we be able to rely, more or less, on the support of the American government.

But I have to warn against illusions: despite the fact that we achieved great results in this sphere in the last years, both politically and materially, let us not fool ourselves in thinking that America ever identified or will ever identify in the future with the State of Israel. No state ever identifies with another, because there is no identity of interests between a world power, powerful and affluent as is the United States, and a small and poor nation in the faraway corner of the Middle East. And just as America does not identify itself with us, we do not identify with America. America has never committed itself, nor will it ever do so, to stand behind us in all of what we shall do or want. The United States has its own considerations, and they are sometimes different from ours, and sometimes they are even fully contradictory to ours. And we

have our considerations. They do not have to be contrary to those of America, but neither do they have to be identical with them.

* * *

Yet despite the fact that there is no identity, and there can be no identity, there exists an ever-growing partnership—a partnership linked to human freedom and to a democratic system of government, based on liberty, government freely elected by the people, freedom of thought, freedom of speech, freedom of debate.[11]

"Exile has planted into us distrust of all governments. We were a people perpetually in opposition to all government, because we were not in control of our own fate." In those words, voiced in 1953, Ben Gurion expressed one of the most central thoughts of his later period: his deep doubts about the internal difficulties facing the Jewish people in its attempt to lead the life of a nation-state, to obey the law and bear the burden of running a state. In the public debate of the late fifties and sixties, these doubts came to the fore in Ben Gurion's insistence on *Mamlachtiyut*—the primacy of the state.

There is no doubt that this concept has obvious etatist connotations, and for this reason Ben Gurion's usage of it was very critically attacked by many within his own party. For the Labor movement, always basing itself on voluntarism and being publicly identified with voluntary associations as the Histadruth and the kibbutz, such a term was far from welcome. The fact that Ben Gurion also tended to focus on *Mamlachtiyut* in extolling the virtues of the army certainly gave credence to these fears, especially as many of Ben Gurion's followers, lacking his historical insights and nuances, translated *Mamlachtiyut* into a somewhat uncritical cult of the military and defense establishment. Such views were occasionally also sanctioned by Ben Gurion himself in the heat of the political polemics at the end of his period as prime minister.

It appears, however, that something much deeper was involved for Ben Gurion himself. At the root of his views on educating the Jewish people to the idea of the primacy of the state was his pessimistic reading of Jewish history. Like Aharon David Gordon, Ben Gurion thought that the Jewish tradition of living on the borderline, of knowing how to get along under any regime and under any system, may in the end be the undoing of the Jewish commonwealth. Because Jews were living in exile, they lacked the immediate discipline of obeying laws, and the Zionist revolution to Ben Gurion meant not only immigration to Israel and

transition to a life based on labor but also learning how to live within the law, not at its margin. These were very harsh words, yet Ben Gurion had no idealized view of the Jewish people. After all, it is a people in dire need of redemption precisely because Exile has corrupted its life and its values. In a long speech made in 1954, Ben Gurion put this in a most revealing fashion, and it may be worthwhile to quote this at some length because it deals with issues that became a subject for general concern in Israel only many years later. Yet Ben Gurion appears to have grasped them much earlier:

> The people in Israel has not yet been sufficiently imbued with political, statelike [*mamlachti*] consciousness and responsibility, as befits a self-governing nation. In most countries of Exile, Jews have suffered from the hands of a hostile government, and they had to devise stratagems to outsmart the laws of the land and its discriminatory regulations. Such habits, developed over the generations, do not disappear in a few years, and a new immigrant, descending from the plane or boat, does not become overnight a patriot and a law-abiding citizen. A well-ordered state is not an outcome of well-ordered morals, but an outcome of well-ordered and educated citizenship. It is of course true that bad government makes it difficult to educate good citizens, yet government is not everything. And a people used to Exile [*am galuti*], oppressed, lacking independence for thousands of years, does not change overnight, by fiat or by a declaration of independence, into a sovereign, state-bearing people [*am mamlachti*], lovingly and willingly carrying the duties and burdens of independence. Because independence does not only grant rights, but it also imposes heavy responsibilities.
>
> Most of our public knows how to demand from the state more than a hundred percent of what it owes the state. It demands from the state good and excellent services, but does not like paying taxes, without which no services are possible. At best everyone would easily agree that his neighbour pay taxes, but not he himself. And the many factions, which will never be asked to assume the responsibility of government, try to catch the support of voters by demanding opulent services and low taxes. And in this respect there is no difference between right-wing and left-wing factions.
>
> In our country, even personal manners are deficient. Many of our inhabitants, including Israeli youth, have not learned how to respect their fellow-citizens and treat them with politeness, tolerance and sympathy. Elementary decency is lacking among us, that decency which makes public life pleasant and creates a climate of comradeship and mutual affection.
>
> Once upon a time Zionist orators used to pray for the day when they will see Jewish criminals going to Jewish prisons. Such an ideal has been abundantly realized. We have in Israel black marketeers, smugglers, burglars, thieves,

murderers, rapists and all kinds of other criminals. In that respect, we became like "all the nations"—and not necessarily like the more refined among them. And in what has been said here, not all the internal malfunctions of Israel and its people have been enumerated.

But we shall overcome![12]

From the defiant concluding exclamatory sentence, can be seen that Ben Gurion believed that things could and would be changed. Just as he believed that a nation living by its own labor, and not exploiting the labor of another people, can be created in the Land of Israel, so he believed that Israeli society could be educated to become law-abiding and evolve a quality of life overcoming the terrible legacies of Exile.

Yet Ben Gurion never believed that this could be achieved by politics alone or merely through the instrumentalities of the state. For him, the Zionist revolution was not only a transition from dependence to independence, nor was the very existence of the state ever seen by him as an end to itself. Ben Gurion prided himself on being a student of Aristotle, which philosophically may have been slightly presumptuous. It was Aristotle who always maintained that while the state aims at preserving life, its ultimate goal, its *telos,* is the good life, the morally good life. This could also be said of Ben Gurion's view of the state. For all the somewhat uncritical glorification of the state that could be discerned in his writings and speeches in the 1950s and 1960s, the state to him never degenerated into a *Selbstzweck* (end unto itself); it always remained an instrument, basically a moral and educational instrument, through which a nation, not possessing a body politic for millennia, could rediscover the meaning of the *res publica,* of the commonwealth.

For Ben Gurion, a historically highly abnormal people like the Jewish people could maintain a state only if it would not be another run-of-the-mill "normal" state: a Jewish state will be able to exist, according to him, only if it will be a model state, a Good Society, based on the social and spiritual values of one's own labor *(avoda atzmit),* economic self-sufficiency, internal order, and abiding by the law. Precisely because Exile has so much distorted the fabric of Jewish life, the people of Israel cannot just try to have a state like all the nations; it does not possess a social structure like all the nations. There is nothing of the hubris of a Chosen People in such a view. On the contrary, it is a tragic appreciation of the baseness and corruption imposed on the Jewish people by its historical development. This calls for an extra effort, according to Ben Gurion, for a

supreme social and intellectual endeavor, which may enable the Jewish people to emancipate itself from the terrible distortions imposed on it by Exile. Not only has the Jewish people to be taken out of Exile, Exile has also to be taken out of the Jewish people—to paraphrase in this context a Hasidic precept. For this reason, the Zionist revolution always remained for Ben Gurion not a merely political revolution. It had to be accompanied by a social and spiritual revolution as well.