

The Real Victor

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ON THE FIFTH day of the six-day war in 1967, I published an open letter to the Prime Minister, Levy Eshkol. The Israeli army had just conquered the West Bank, East Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip, and I proposed that Eshkol immediately offer the Palestinian people to establish the State of Palestine there, in return for peace with Israel.

I was a Member of the Knesset at the time. Two days after the end of the war, Eshkol asked me to meet him in his office in the Knesset building.

He listened to what I had to say, and then he answered with a fatherly smile: “Uri, what kind of a trader are you? In a negotiation, one offers the minimum and demands the maximum. Then one starts to negotiate, and in the end one reaches an agreement somewhere in the middle. And here you want to offer everything before the negotiation even starts?”

I objected feebly that this may be true about an ordinary deal, but not when the fate of nations is concerned.¹

There was no effective pressure, so Israel kept everything.

I REMEMBERED this episode when I watched the second episode of Raviv Drucker's outstanding TV series about Israel's past Prime Ministers. After Ben-Gurion came Levy Eshkol.

Drucker portrays Eshkol as a nice and bumbling politician, a weak person who happened to be in office when the most fateful war broke out with results that have shaped our destiny to this very day. Little Israel became a regional power, with large occupied territories north, east and west. Eshkol was pushed around by his rebellious generals, made decisions against his will under duress. So Israel's present situation was shaped almost by accident.

All Drucker's facts are scrupulously correct, and like the chapter about Ben-Gurion, this one, too, is full of new disclosures, new even to me.

Yet I think that Drucker's characterization of Eshkol is not completely accurate. True, Eshkol was an amiable person, modest and moderate, but underneath it all there was a hard core, an obstinate belief in the Zionist ideology.

Before becoming Prime Minister by the general consent of the Labor Party, when Ben-Gurion had become intolerable and was kicked out, Eshkol was in charge of settlements. His determination to settle Jews on the land owned by Arabs was unshakable.

Between us a curious relationship developed. I was the enfant terrible of the Knesset, a one-man faction in extreme opposition, hated by the ruling Labor Party. I was seated in the Knesset hall just under the speaker's podium, an ideal place to interrupt the speaker.

Eshkol was an abominable speaker, the despair of the stenographers. His sentences had no beginning and no end. When I interrupted him with a remark, he forgot what he was going to say, turned towards me and answered in a friendly way, driving his party colleagues mad.

But I had no illusions. It was under his government that the Knesset enacted a law that was quite openly designed to close down my weekly magazine, which was detested by the ruling party (a fact that induced me to run for the Knesset).

WHEN THE 1967 Middle East crisis started, Eshkol—then both Prime Minister and Minister of Defense—indeed hesitated to act. Israel was threatened by three Arab armies, America's consent to an Israeli attack was not assured. The crisis lasted for three weeks, and the anxiety of the Israeli population intensified from day to day.

Eshkol looked like an unlikely war leader. At the height of the crisis, he decided to make a radio speech to lift the spirits of the nation. He read from a prepared text—prepared too much. An advisor had improved the manuscript, changing some words. When he reached these words, Eshkol stumbled. It sounded like indecision, and immediately a public conviction was formed: Eshkol must go, or at least give up the Defense Ministry.

A group of women (nicknamed “the Merry Wives of Windsor”) demonstrated in the streets, Eshkol surrendered and Moshe Dayan became Minister of Defense.

The army, which for years had been superbly armed and prepared by Eshkol, won a crushing victory. Dayan, the picturesque one-eyed ex-general became the great vic-

¹The Trade Minister, Haim Zadok, a very clever lawyer, soon gave me another lesson in the Zionist mentality. I asked him what part of the newly occupied territories the government was ready to give back. He replied: “Simple. If possible, we shall give back nothing. If they press us, we shall give back a small part. If they press us more, we shall give back a large part. If they press us very hard, we shall give back everything.” At the time, giving back meant giving back to the King of Jordan.

tor, the dream of women around the world, though his contribution had been minimal.

When it all ended, Eshkol's stature in the public mind remained low. While the case can be made that he was the real victor, all the glory went to the glamorous generals. Israel became a militarist state, the generals became national heroes, Dayan, who was quite incompetent, was venerated.

AND THEN, less than two years after the war, Eshkol suddenly died. These were the fateful two years, in which the surprising results of the war had to be dealt with.

There was no real debate. My friends and I advocated the creation of a Palestinian state and found no support—neither in Israel nor throughout the world. When I visited Washington DC, everybody was adamantly against it. Even the Soviet Union (and the Israeli Communist party) took up the idea only years later.

One of the arguments against it was that the “Arabs of the West Bank” (God forbid calling them Palestinians) wanted to return to the King. So I went to see all the prominent local leaders in the West Bank. At the end of every conversation I asked them point blank: If you had the choice between returning to Jordanian rule or creating a Palestinian state, what would you choose? “Every one of them said: ”a Palestinian state, of course.”

When I brought this up in a Knesset debate, Dayan, then still the Minister of Defense, answered that I was lying. When I brought it up again in a debate with the Prime Minister, Eshkol supported his minister.

But then Eshkol did something that only an Eshkol could do: his advisor for Arab affairs called me and asked for a meeting. We met in the Knesset Member's cafeteria. “The Prime Minister has asked me to find out on what you base your assertion,” he told me.

I recounted my conversations with the various Arab leaders in the occupied territories. He drew up a meticulous protocol and summed it up: “I agree with MK Avnery on every detail. However, we both agree that a Palestinian state without East Jerusalem as capital is unthinkable. Since the government has decided to keep East Jerusalem in any peace agreement, the idea of a Palestinian state is irrelevant.” (I have just transferred this document to the National Archive.)

The extreme right already demanded the annexation of all the occupied territory to Greater Israel, but they were then far from power, and few took them seriously.

What remained was the vague “Jordanian Option”. The idea was to return the West Bank to King Hussein, on the condition that he let us have East Jerusalem.

That was a crazy idea, resulting from a total ignorance

of Arab reality. The king was a scion of the Hashemite family, the family of the prophet Muhammad. The idea that he would give up the third holiest place of Islam, the place from which the Prophet himself had ascended to heaven, was ludicrous. But Eshkol, like all the other ministers, had no idea about Islamic or Arab affairs.

THE ONLY Israeli Prime Minister who knew Arab Palestinians was hardly mentioned in Drucker's series: Moshe Sharett.

Sharett was Israel's second Prime Minister. When Ben-Gurion decided to abdicate and settle in the Negev, Foreign Minister Sharett was chosen by his party to succeed him. It took Ben-Gurion about a year to decide that he wanted to be Prime Minister after all, so he returned to the Defense Ministry, and after some time to the Prime Minister's office.

Sharett was the opposite of Ben-Gurion in almost every respect. It is no accident that Drucker hardly mentions him. He was considered weak, indeed negligible. While Ben-Gurion was decisive, bold and even adventurous, Sharett was considered a coward and widely despised.

But Sharett, who came to Palestine from Ukraine at the age of 12, had lived for two years in Arab neighborhoods. Unlike all other Prime Ministers, he spoke Arabic, thought Arabic and understood the Arabs. He even looked faintly Arab, with a well kept mustache.

When Ben-Gurion returned from his Negev self-exile, he had the idea of invading Lebanon, installing a Christian leader as dictator, and turning it into the first Arab state to make peace with Israel. Sharett, still Prime Minister, thought this a stupid idea. But he did not dare to stand up to Ben-Gurion publicly. He went home and wrote a letter to Ben-Gurion, in which he listed everything that was wrong about the idea. The plan was abandoned.

A generation later, Ben-Gurion's favorite, Ariel Sharon, then Minister of Defense, executed Ben-Gurion's plan, with exactly the results Sharett had prophesied. But it did not help to resurrect Sharett's reputation.

Sharett was also a very vain person. Once we met at the foot of the Metsada (Masada) mountain, at the start of the very arduous climb to the top. It took him an hour and 5 minutes, quite a feat for a man of his age. Yet, by mistake, I reported in my paper that it took him 105 minutes. He was so enraged that he sent me an official letter demanding a correction and an apology. I complied, of course.

Sharett died early, a bitter and disappointed man. Still, I think that he, too, deserved a chapter in Drucker's excellent series.