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GOLDA MEIR: MOTHER OF ISRAEL

1898	Born in Kiev
1906	Emigrated to Milwaukee
1921	Emigrated to Palestine
1948	Signatory to Israel's declaration of independence
1949–56	Minister of Labor
1956–66	Foreign Minister
1969	Prime Minister
1973	Yom Kippur War
1974	Resigned as Prime Minister
1978	Died

Golda Meir was born Goldie Mabovitch, in 1898, in Kiev in the Ukraine, the daughter of a Russian-Jewish family. Among her earliest memories was that of her father and his neighbors nailing boards across the doorway to guard against a cossack raid.[1] At the age of eight she and her family emigrated to the United States and settled in Milwaukee.

She grew up in that city, studied education, and entered upon a career as a teacher. As a young woman, Golda became passionately committed to the Zionist movement—the drive to create a Jewish homeland in Israel—and was one of the leaders of the Milwaukee Labor Zionist Party. She married Morris Myerson, and in 1921 they emigrated to Palestine, where they joined a Jewish agricultural commune (kibbutz). In Palestine she adopted the Hebrew version of her last name, "Meir."

Meir soon plunged into Israeli politics. She represented her kibbutz in the Histardruth, the General Federation of Labor, and later became secretary to its Women's Labor Council. During World War II she continued to be a spokesperson for the Zionist cause and, in the years immediately following the war, she worked tirelessly for Zionism. On May 14, 1948, she was a signatory to Israel's declaration of independence and, in that same year, she was appointed the new state's minister to Moscow. The following year Meir was elected to the Israeli parliament, the Knesset, where she served until 1974. In 1956 she was appointed foreign minister and, in 1967, became one of the founders of the Israel Labor Party. In 1969 Meir was elected prime minister upon the death of Levi Eshkol.

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[1] Golda Meir, *A Land of Our Own, An Oral Autobiography* (New York: Putnam, 1973), p. 15.

Despite her commitment to peace with Israel's Arab neighbors she lived during a period of five wars between Israel and those neighboring Arab states. The last and most serious of them, the so-called Yom Kippur War, broke out in October 1973 with a sudden attack on two fronts from Egypt and Syria.

The Yom Kippur War

GOLDA MEIR

Golda Meir had been, in some considerable part, responsible for the worldwide support that had come to the new state of Israel. She traveled widely encouraging and promoting that support, which was crucial in enabling Israel to survive in the hostile environment of the Arab Middle East. She was, as prime minister in 1973, responsible for the conduct of the Yom Kippur War, which began on that most holy of Jewish holy days.

In her autobiography Meir writes of the war, not as a military narrative, but as an account of the political events that led up to it, the policy considerations of the Israeli state, and her own reactions to it.

The following excerpt is from that account.

Of all the events upon which I have touched in this book, none is so hard for me to write about as the war of October, 1973, the Yom Kippur War. But it happened, and so it belongs here—not as a military account, because that I leave to others, but as a near disaster, a nightmare that I myself experienced and which will always be with me.

Even as a personal story, there is still a great deal that cannot be told, and what I write is far from being definitive. But it is the truth as I felt and knew it in the course of that war, which was the fifth to be forced on Israel in the twenty-seven years that have passed since the state was founded.

There are two points I should like to make at once. The first is that we won the Yom Kippur War, and I am convinced that in their heart of hearts the political and military leaders of both Syria and Egypt know that they were defeated again, despite their initial gains. The other is that the world in general and Israel's enemies in particular should know that the circumstances which took the lives of the more than 2,500 Israelis who were killed in the Yom Kippur War will never ever recur.

The war began on October 6, but when I think about it now, my mind goes back to May, when we received information about the reinforcement of Syrian and Egyptian troops on the borders. Our intelligence people thought that it was most unlikely that war would break out; nonetheless, we decided to treat the matter seriously. At that time I went to general headquarters myself. Both the minister of defense and the chief of staff, David Elazar (who is known throughout the country by his nickname, Dado) briefed me thoroughly on the armed forces' state of preparedness, and I was convinced that the army was ready for any contingency—even for full-scale war. Also, my mind was put at rest about the question of a sufficiently early warning. Then, for whatever reason, the tension relaxed.

In September we started to receive information about a buildup of Syrian troops on the Golan Heights, and on the thirteenth of that month an air battle took place with the Syrians, which ended in the downing of thirteen Syrian MIGs. Despite this, our intelligence people were very reassuring: It was most unlikely they said, that there would be any major Syrian reaction. But this time, the tension remained, and what's more, it had spread to the Egyptians. Still our intelligence assessment remained the same. The continued Syrian reinforcement of troops was, they explained, caused by the Syrians' fear that *we* would attack, and throughout the month, including on the eve of my departure to Europe, this explanation for the Syrian move was repeated again and again.

On Monday, October 1, Yisrael Galili called me in Strasbourg. Among other things, he told me that he had talked to Dayan and that they both felt that as soon as I got back, we should have a serious discussion about the situation in the Golan Heights. I told him that I would definitely return the next day and that we should meet the day after.

Late on Wednesday morning I met with Dayan, Allon, Galili, the commander of the air force, the chief of staff and, because the head of intelligence was sick that day, the head of military intelligence research. Dayan opened the meeting, and the chief of staff and the head of intelligence research described the situation on both fronts in great detail. There were things that disturbed them, but the military evaluation was still that we were in no danger of facing a joint Syrian-Egyptian attack and, what's more, that it was very unlikely that Syria would attack us alone. The buildup and movement of Egyptian forces in the south was probably due to the maneuvers that were always held around this time of year, and in the north the bolstering and new deployment of forces were still explained as they had been before. The fact that several Syrian army units had been transferred only a week before from the Syrian-Jordanian border was interpreted as part of a recent détente between the two countries and as a Syrian gesture of goodwill toward Jordan. Nobody at the meeting thought that it was necessary to call up the reserves, and nobody thought that war was imminent. But it was decided to put a further discussion of the situation on the agenda for Sunday's cabinet meeting.

On Thursday, as usual, I went to Tel Aviv. For years I had been spending Thursdays and Fridays in my Tel Aviv office, Saturdays at my house in Ramat Aviv and returning to Jerusalem either late Saturday evening or early Sunday morning, and there seemed to be no reason for changing the pattern that week. In fact, it was a short week in any case, because Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement) was to begin on Friday evening, and most people in Israel were taking a long weekend. . . .

On Friday, October 5, we received a report that worried me. The families of the Russian advisers in Syria were packing up and leaving in a hurry. It reminded me of what had happened prior to the Six-Day War, and I didn't like it at all. Why the haste? What did those Russian families know that we didn't know? Was it possible that they were being evacuated? In all the welter of information pouring into my office that one little detail had taken root in my mind, and I couldn't shake myself free of it. But since no one around me seemed very perturbed about it, I tried not to become obsessive. Besides, intuition is a very tricky thing; sometimes it must be acted upon at once, but sometimes it is merely a symptom of anxiety and then it can be very misleading indeed.

I asked the minister of defense, the chief of staff and the head of intelligence whether they thought this piece of information was very important. No, it hadn't in any way changed their assessment of the situation. I was assured that we would get adequate warning of any real trouble, and anyway, sufficient reinforcements were being sent to the fronts to carry out any holding operation that might be required. Everything that was necessary had been done, and the army was placed on high alert, particularly the air force and the armored corps. When he left me, the head of intelligence met Lou Kaddar in the corridor. Later she told me that he had patted her shoulder, smiled and said, "Don't worry. There won't be a war." But I was worried; furthermore, I couldn't understand his certainty that all was well. What if he were wrong? If there was even the slightest chance of war, we should at least call up the reserves. At any rate, I wanted a meeting at least of those cabinet ministers who would be spending the Yom Kippur weekend in Tel Aviv. It turned out that very few of them were around. I was reluctant to ask the two National Religious Party ministers who lived in Jerusalem to come to a meeting in Tel Aviv on the eve of Yom Kippur, and several other ministers had already left for their kibbutzim, which were all fairly far away. Still, nine ministers were in town, and I told my military secretary to schedule an emergency meeting for Friday noon.

We gathered in my Tel Aviv office. In addition to the cabinet members, the meeting was attended by the chief of staff and the head of intelligence. We heard all the reports again, including the one that concerned the rushed—and to me still inexplicable—departure of the Russian families from Syria, but again, no one seemed very alarmed. Nevertheless, I decided to speak my mind. "Look," I said, "I have a terrible feeling that this has all happened before. It reminds me of 1967, when we were accused of massing troops against Syria, which is exactly what the Arab press is saying now. And I think that it all means something." As a result, although as a rule a cabinet decision is required for a full-scale callup, that Friday we passed a resolution, suggested by Galili, that if necessary, the minister of defense and I could do so by ourselves. I also said that we should get in touch with the Americans so that they could get in touch with the Russians and tell them in no uncertain terms that the United States was not in the mood for trouble. The meeting broke up, but I stayed on at the office for a while, thinking.

How could it be that I was still so terrified of war breaking out when the present chief of staff, two former chiefs of staff (Dayan and Chaim Bar-Lev, who was my minister of commerce and industry) and the head of intelligence were far from sure that it would? After all, they weren't just ordinary soldiers. They were all highly experienced generals, men who had fought and led other men in spectacularly victorious battles. Each one of them had an outstanding military record, and as for our intelligence services, they were known to be among the best in the world. Not only that, but foreign sources with whom we were in constant touch agreed absolutely with the assessment of our experts. So why was it that I was still so ill at ease? Was I perhaps talking myself into something? I couldn't answer my own questions.

Today I know what I should have done. I should have overcome my hesitations. I knew as well as anyone else [what] full-scale mobilization meant and how much money it would cost, and I also knew that only a few months before, in May, we had had an alert and the reserves had been called up; but nothing had happened. But I also understood that perhaps there had been no war in May exactly because the reserves had been called up. That Friday morning I should have listened to the warnings of my own heart and ordered a callup. For me, that fact cannot and never will be erased, and there can be no consolation in anything that anyone else has to say or in all of the commonsense rationalizations with which my colleagues have tried to comfort me.

It doesn't matter what logic dictated. It matters only that I, who was so accustomed to making decisions—and who did make them throughout the war—failed to make that one decision. It isn't a question of feeling guilty. I, too, can rationalize and tell myself that in the face of such total certainty on the part of our military intelligence—and the almost equally total acceptance of its evaluations on the part of our foremost military men—it would have been unreasonable of me to have insisted on a callup. But I know that I should have done so, and I shall live with that terrible knowledge for the rest of my life. I will never again be the person I was before the Yom Kippur War.

Then, however, I sat in the office, thinking and agonizing until I just couldn't sit there anymore and I went home. Menachem and Aya had invited a few friends to drop in after dinner. Jews eat dinner early on the eve of Yom Kippur because traditionally it is their last meal for twenty-four hours, and by the time the stars are out the fast has begun. We sat down to eat; but I was very restless and had no appetite at all, and although they wanted me to stay on with their friends, I excused myself and went to bed. But I couldn't sleep.

It was a still, hot night, and through the open window I could hear the voices of Menachem and Aya's friends talking quietly in the garden below. Once or twice the children's dog barked, but otherwise it was a typically silent Yom Kippur night. I lay awake for hours, unable to sleep. Eventually I must have dozed off. Then, at about 4 A.M., the phone next to my bed rang. It was my military secretary. Information had been received that the Egyptians and the Syrians would launch a joint attack on Israel "late in the afternoon." There was no doubt anymore. The intelligence source was authoritative. I told Lior to ask Dayan, Dado, Allon and Galili to be in my office before 7 A.M. On the way there, I caught sight of an old man going to synagogue, his prayer shawl over his shoulders holding the hand of a small child. They looked like symbols of Judaism itself, and I remember thinking sorrowfully that all over Israel, young men were fasting in synagogues today and that it was from their prayers that they would soon be called to arms.

By eight o'clock the meeting had begun. Dayan and Dado differed as to the scale of the callup. The chief of staff recommended the mobilization of the entire air force and four divisions and said that if they were called up at once, they could go into action the next day—that is, Sunday. Dayan, on the other hand, was in favor of calling up the air force and only two divisions (one for the north and one for the south), and he argued that if we had a full mobilization before a single shot was fired, the world would have an excuse for calling us the "aggressors." Besides, he thought that the air force plus two divisions could handle the situation, and if toward evening the situation worsened, we could always call up more within a few hours. "That's my suggestion," he said, "but I won't resign if you decide against me."

"My God," I thought, "*I* have to decide which of them is right?" But what I said was that I had only one criterion: If there really was a war, then we had to be in the best position possible. "The callup should be as Dado suggested." But, of course, it was the one day of the year that even our legendary ability to mobilize rapidly partly failed us.

Dado was in favor of a preemptive strike since it was clear that war was inevitable in any case. "I want you to know," he said, "that our air force can be ready to strike at noon, but you must give me the green light now. If we can make that first strike, it will be greatly to our advantage." But I had already made up my mind. "Dado," I said, "I know all the arguments in favor of a preemptive strike, but I am against it. We don't know now, any of us, what the future will hold, but there is always the possibility that we will need help, and if we strike first, we will get nothing from anyone. I would like to say yes because I know what it would mean, but with a heavy heart I am going to say no." Then Dayan and Dado went to their offices and I told Simcha Dinitz (now our ambassador to Washington, who happened to be in Israel that week) to fly back to the States immediately and I called in Menachem Begin to tell him what was happening. I also asked for a cabinet meeting for noon and called the then U.S. ambassador, Kenneth Keating, and asked him to come and see me. I told him two things: that according to our intelligence, the attacks would start late in the afternoon and that we would not strike first. Maybe something could still be done to avert the war by U.S. intervention with the Russians or maybe even directly with the Syrians and the Egyptians. At all events, we would not make a preemptive strike. I wanted him to know that and to relay that information as soon as possible to Washington. Ambassador Keating had been a very good friend to Israel for many years, both in the U.S. Senate and in Israel itself. He was a man I liked and trusted and on that dreadful morning I was grateful to him for his assistance and understanding.

When the cabinet met at noon, it heard a full description of the situation, including the decision to mobilize the reserves and also my decision regarding a preemptive strike. Nobody raised any objections whatsoever. Then, while we were meeting, my military secretary burst into the room with the news that the shooting had started, and almost at once we heard the wailing of the first air-raid sirens in Tel Aviv. The war had begun. . . .

What those days were like for me I shall not even try to describe. It is enough, I think, to say that I couldn't even cry when I was alone. But I was very rarely alone. I stayed in the office most of the time, although now and then I went to the war room and sometimes Lou made me go home and lie down until the phone summoned me back. There were meetings all through the day and all through the night, incessantly interrupted by phone calls from Washington and bad news from the front. Plans were presented, analyzed and debated. I couldn't bear to be away from the office for more than an hour at a time because Dayan, Dado, Foreign Office people and various ministers were constantly coming in either to report to me on the most recent developments or to ask my advice on various matters.

But even on the worst of those early days, when we already knew what losses we were sustaining, I had complete faith in our soldiers and officers, in the spirit of the Israel Defense Forces and their ability to face any challenge, and I never lost faith in our ultimate victory. I knew we would win sooner or later; but each report of the price we were paying in human lives was like a knife being turned in my heart, and I shall never forget the day when I listened to the most pessimistic prediction I had yet heard.

On the afternoon of October 7 Dayan returned from one of his tours at the front and asked to see me at once. He told me that in his opinion the situation in the south was so bad that we should pull back substantially and establish a new defensive line. I listened to him in horror. Allon, Galili and my military secretary were in the room. Then I asked Dado to come in too. He had another suggestion—that we should go on with the offensive in the south. He asked if he could go to the southern front to supervise things himself and for permission to make whatever decisions might have to be made on the spot. Dayan agreed and Dado left. That night I called a cabinet meeting and got the ministers' approval for us to launch a counterattack against the Egyptians on October 8. When I was alone in the room, I closed my eyes and sat perfectly still for a minute. I think that if I hadn't learned, during all those years, how to be strong, I would have gone to pieces then. But I didn't.

The Canal had been crossed by the Egyptians, and our forces in the Sinai had been battered. The Syrians had penetrated in depth on the Golan Heights. On both fronts the casualties were already very high. One burning question was whether at this point we should tell the nation how bad the situation really was, and I felt very strongly that we should wait for a while. The very least we could do for our soldiers, and for their families, was to keep the truth to ourselves for a few more days. Nonetheless, some kind of statement had to be made at once, so on that first day of the war I addressed the citizens of Israel. It was one of the most difficult assignments of my life because I knew that, for everyone's sake, I could not tell all the facts.

Talking to a nation that had no idea yet of the terrible toll being taken in the north and in the south or of the peril that Israel faced until the reserves were fully mobilized and in action, I said, "We are in no doubt that we shall prevail. But we are also convinced that this renewal of Egyptian and Syrian aggression is an act of madness. We did our best to prevent the outbreak. We appealed to quarters with political influence to use it in order to frustrate this infamous move of the Egyptian and Syrian leaders. While there was still time, we informed friendly countries of the confirmed information that we had of the plans for an offensive against Israel. We called on them to do their utmost to prevent war, but the Egyptian and Syrian attack had started."

On Sunday Dayan came in to my office. He closed the door and stood in front of me. "Do you want me to resign?" he asked. "I am prepared to do so if you think I should. Unless I have your confidence, I can't go on." I told him—and I have never regretted this—that he had to stay on as minister of defense. We decided to send Bar-Lev to the north for a personal assessment of the situation. Then we began our negotiations to get military aid from the United States. Decisions had to be taken very quickly—and they had to be the right ones. There was no time nor any margin for mistakes.

By Wednesday, the fifth day of the war, we had pushed the Syrians back across the 1967 cease-fire line and begun our attack into Syria, while in Sinai the situation was sufficiently static for the cabinet to consider our crossing of the Canal. But what if our troops crossed and then were trapped? I also had to consider the possibility that the war would not be a short one and that we might find ourselves without the planes, tanks and ammunition we needed. We needed arms desperately, and, in the beginning they were slow in coming.

I talked to Dinitz in Washington at all hours of the day and the night. Where was the airlift? Why wasn't it under way yet? I remember calling him once at 3 A.M., Washington time, and he said, "I can't speak to anyone now, Golda. It is much too early." But I couldn't listen to reason. I knew that President Nixon had promised to help us, and I knew from my past experience with him that he would not let us down. Let me, at this point, repeat something that I have said often before (usually to the extreme annoyance of many of my American friends). However history judges Richard Nixon—and it is probable that the verdict will be very harsh—it must also be put on the record forever that he did not break a single one of the promises he made to us. So why was there a delay? "I don't care what time it is," I raged at Dinitz. "Call Kissinger now. In the middle of the night. We need the help today because tomorrow it may be too late."... Each hour of waiting that passed was like a century for me, but there was no alternative other than to hold on tight and hope that the next hour would bring better news. I phoned Dinitz and told him that I was ready to fly to Washington incognito to meet with Nixon if he thought it could be arranged. "Find out immediately," I said. "I want to go as soon as possible." But it wasn't necessary. At last Nixon himself ordered the giant C-5 Galaxies to be sent, and the first flight arrived on the ninth day of the war, on October 14. The airlift was invaluable. It not only lifted our spirits, but also served to make the American position clear to the Soviet Union, and it undoubtedly served to make our victory possible. When I heard that the planes had touched down in Lydda, I cried for the first time since the war had begun, though not for the last. That was also the day on which we published the first casualty list—656 Israelis had already died in battle.

But even the Galaxies that brought us tanks, ammunition, clothing, medical supplies and air-to-air rockets couldn't bring all that was required. What about the planes? The Phantoms and Skyhawks had to be refueled en route, so they were refueled in the air. But they came—and so did the Galaxies that landed in Lydda, sometimes at the rate of one every fifteen minutes.

When it was all over, in the spring, the U.S. colonel who had been in charge of the airlift came back to visit Israel with his wife, and they came to see me. They were lovely young people, filled with enthusiasm for the country and with admiration for our ground crews, who had learned, almost overnight, to use the special equipment for unloading those giants. I remember going out to Lydda once to watch the Galaxies come in. They looked like some kind of immense prehistoric flying monsters, and I thought to myself, "Thank God I was right to reject the idea of a preemptive strike! It might have saved lives in the beginning, but I am sure that we would not have had that airlift, which is now saving so many lives."

In the meantime, Dado shuttled from one front to the other. Bar-Lev returned from the north, and we sent him to the south to straighten out the confusion that had arisen there because the generals on the spot had such critical differences of opinion about the tactics to be employed. He was asked to stay there as long as necessary. On Wednesday he phoned me from the Sinai. It was right after a colossal tank battle in which our forces had smashed the Egyptian armored advance. Dado has a slow, very deliberate way of speaking, and when I heard him say, "G-o-l-d-a, it will be all right. We are back to being ourselves and they are back to being themselves." I knew that the tide had turned, although there were still bloody battles ahead in which hundreds of young men, and older ones too, lost their lives. It was not for nothing that people bitterly suggested later that this war should be known, not as the Yom Kippur War, but as the War of the Fathers and Sons, for all too often they fought side by side on both fronts....

The next day I addressed the Knesset. I was very tired, but I spoke for forty minutes because I had a lot to say, although most of it didn't make pleasant hearing. But at least I could tell the Knesset that, as I was speaking, a task force was already operating on the west bank of the Canal. I wanted also to make public our gratitude to the president and the people of America, and, equally clear, our rage at those governments, notably the French and British, that had chosen to impose an embargo on the shipments of arms to us when we were fighting for our very lives. And most of all, I wanted the world to know what would have happened to us had we withdrawn before the war to pre-Six-Day War lines of 1967—the very same lines, incidentally, that had not prevented the Six-Day War itself from breaking out, although no one seems to remember that. . . .

Also, I wanted to put on record the culpability of the Soviet Union and to stress the evil role Russia was once again playing in the Middle East. . . .

The Yom Kippur War: The Aftermath

HOWARD M. SACHAR

Howard M. Sachar is not only an American academic historian but an established authority on Israel and the contemporary Middle East. Among his many books is *A History of Israel from the Rise of Zionism to our Time.* In this book he gives a very detailed and analytical account of the Yom Kippur War that parallels the highly personal account of Mrs. Meir. He goes on to deal then with the implications of the war for Israel's search for security.

And so the familiar ritual was to begin once more: the protracted diplomatic stalemate, the quest for at least an intermediate security in the wake of a dearly achieved military triumph. Under American pressure, Israel reluctantly had allowed a Red Cross supply convoy to pass through its lines to the beleaguered Egyptian Third Army. But thereafter the Meir government was unprepared to offer further concessions until the Egyptians made available a list of Israeli prisoners of war. Nor could there be any question of Israeli forces returning to their October 22 positions on the west bank of the Canal, as the Egyptians demanded. Concessions had to be mutual, Mrs. Meir insisted. As it turned out, the prime minister's difficulties henceforth were to be less with the Arabs than with the Americans. On October 27, Secretary of State Kissinger was visited in Washington by Ismail Fahmi, a genial and resourceful Egyptian diplomat who was shortly to become his country's foreign minister. Kissinger was impressed by the Egyptian's seeming moderation, his professed wish for renewed ties with the United States, and his avowed interest in peace. The secretary therefore assured Fahmi that he would do his utmost not merely to negotiate a permanent supply corridor to the Third Army—in effect, to secure Israeli withdrawal to the October 22 cease-fire line—but to persuade Israel gradually to evacuate the Sinai altogether in return for a stable peace treaty. As the initial step in fulfillment of this pledge, Kissinger requested Jerusalem to evince "flexibility" on the supply corridor.

By then, Mrs. Meir recognized that there was no further time to be lost in achieving clarification with the Americans. On October 31 she flew to Washington to meet personally with Kissinger and Nixon. In her discussions with the secretary, the prime minister expressed her government's basic reservations. By what moral obligation, she asked, was Israel to pay a higher price than Egypt for accommodation, since the Egyptians had launched the war and had failed subsequently to win it? Kissinger appreciated Mrs. Meir's reasoning. Yet his own arguments were not less compelling. It was true that Israel had won the war on the battlefield. Its army had penetrated deep into Arab territory and its casualties were less than one-fifth of those sustained by the Arabs. But the secretary knew, too, that the victory had left the Israelis with ashes in their mouths. The cost in blood and treasure had been far too high. Moreover, Israel now found itself in a state of virtual diplomatic isolation. . . .

These were the circumstances under which Kissinger sought, and achieved, a more flexible Israeli bargaining position from Mrs. Meir. The secretary then pursued the opportunity for a Middle East accommodation in a five-nation swing through the Arab capitals between November 5 and 9, while en route to the Far East. He was well received by the Arab leaders as a "messenger of peace," the only man, after all, who could persuade the Israelis to disgorge occupied land. In a cordial meeting with Sadat on November 7, Kissinger persuaded the Egyptian leader to modify his demand for an immediate Israeli withdrawal to the October 22 cease-fire line, and instead to put this narrow issue into the broader context of a general disengagement of Israeli and Egyptian troops. Both sides, in any event, recognized that the current cease-fire lines were too precariously entwined to survive. Kissinger meanwhile assured Sadat that, at a peace conference later, he, the secretary, would exert his influence on the Israelis to achieve a more generous withdrawal in the Sinai. . . .

By then also, Kissinger was known in both Egypt and Israel as a "miracle man." It was indeed his success in mediating the disengagement, and his promise to undertake a similar effort between Israel and Syria, that persuaded the Arab oil-producing nations on March 18 to end their embargo, although not their continuing price hikes. Factories in Europe and the United States gradually resumed production; traffic began to move freely again. The atmosphere seemingly was conducive for a parallel Syrian-Israeli disengagement. Both Sadat and Feisal of Saudi Arabia were appealing now to Damascus to rely on Kissinger's good offices. Admittedly, the task of negotiating an accord on the Golan would not be easy. The Syrians had earned a reputation as the most uncompromising nationalists in the Arab world. Their hostility toward Israel was more deeply rooted and implacable than that of any other Arab people. Worse yet, the Assad government remained a minority cabal, largely Alawite in membership, and widely distrusted by the public at large; it enjoyed little political elbow-room for compromise. Nor were matters helped by the personality of Assad himself. Kissinger's conversations with the forty-eight-year-old ex-air force general proved to be the most exasperating of his diplomatic career. The man was apparently immovable, Kissinger confided to intimates, and given to disconcerting intervals of crooning in the midst of negotiations. Not least of all, the Assad regime was receiving powerful encouragement from Moscow to hold firm. Fearful of losing Syria altogether to American influence, the Soviets were determined to coalesce a hard-line Syrian-Iraqi-Libyan-Palestinian "rejection front." With Soviet backing, then, the Damascus government continued to insist that part of the Golan be returned immediately, with an advance commitment from Israel to evacuate the entire plateau in final negotiations.

The Israelis at first appeared equally unbudging. If the war had taught them anything, it was not merely the incorrigible brutality of their northern enemy, but the absence of territorial leeway for concessions on the Golan. From the western edge of this highland, it was a descent of only 60 miles to the Haifa-Acre enclave, the industrial heartland of the Jewish state; and the Israelis had learned the hard way that without at least a substantial foothold on the Golan, including the "eyes" of the Mount Hermon range, their warning time and defense buffer area were critically reduced. Nevertheless, the Meir cabinet understood that some small accommodation would have to be offered even on this northern front. American pressure was not the only factor here. The Syrians evidently intended to maintain the state of tension along the cease-fire line. Throughout March and April they fired repeated artillery salvos at Israeli emplacements and launched occasional commando raids behind the Israeli front lines. The rising scale of violence imposed a daily attrition that the nation was no longer prepared to endure. In the new round of fighting between March and May 1974, the Israelis suffered an additional 37 soldiers killed and 158 wounded.

Even more decisive in altering the government's stance was the issue of prisoners of war. The Israelis counted over 200 troops missing on the northern front, and possessed no way of determining how many of these were alive; Damascus refused to supply a list of Israeli POWs or to allow Red Cross inspection. From the trussed and bullet-riddled Israeli corpses retrieved on the Golan, however, little imagination was needed to assess the fate of those troops remaining in Syrian hands. Each additional day of their captivity was a nightmare for the Israeli people. The families of missing troops already were demonstrating before the Knesset and the prime minister's office. If the Syrians could be persuaded to display even the meagerest evidence of flexibility, Israel would respond. . . .

In the 1949 Israeli-Syrian armistice agreement, both parties had agreed that no "paramilitary forces" would be allowed to commit any "warlike or hostile" act against the other. This time Damascus refused to make a similar commitment: it would not publicly disown activities by the various guerrilla organizations. On the other hand, the United States reassured Israel. "Raids by armed groups or individuals across the demarcation line are contrary to the cease-fire," said Kissinger's letter. "Israel, in the exercise of its rights of self-defense, may act to prevent such actions by all available means." Presumably the veiled warning would inhibit fedayun attacks directly from the Syrian territory (for several years it did). On this basis the Israeli Knesset voted to approve the agreement, 73 to 35. Almost immediately afterward prisoners of war were exchanged; many of the Israelis among them were human wrecks. In the next three weeks the troop disengagement was carried out on schedule. Although the Syrians ominously took no steps to rebuild or repopulate al-Quneitra—flattened by Israel as a "precautionary measure" before withdrawal—it appeared nevertheless that the likelihood of renewed hostilities in the north had faded for the time being.

Meanwhile, the elections for Israel's Eighth Knesset, postponed for two months due to the war and afterward rescheduled for December 31, were held under the shadow of the nation's heavy manpower losses and the perennial threat of renewed fighting. The Labor Alignment undoubtedly would have suffered a limited erosion in any case as a result of scandals in government and class inequities in society. But in the wake of the recent conflict, military-territorial issues were to take precedence once more. The fall of the Bar-Lev Line and the pulverizing Syrian offensive had thrown the nation into shock. Whatever the complaints against the Alignment, no one had ever doubted that a regime headed by Golda Meir and Moshe Dayan could be relied on to maintain the invincibility of the near-sacred defense forces. Now that assurance had been undermined. So had confidence in the nation's security altogether. Israel's first three wars had not ended in peace treaties; but they had at least produced extended interludes of comparative stability. No longer, evidently. In 1973–74, Soviet pressure, with American acquiescence, had compelled the army to halt short of final victory and of logical strategic goals. The implications for the future were grave.

The trauma of the war, the specter of possibly bloodier and even more open-ended conflicts, profoundly altered national attitudes toward the occupied territories as well. On November 12–13, a poll conducted by the Israel Institute of Social Research found that three-fourths of the citizens interviewed were prepared, in exchange for peace, to give up all or nearly all of the land taken in 1967. This attitude in turn forced a certain revision of party platforms for the impending elections. As we recall, the Labor Alignment on November 28 sharply modified the original Galili plan, and implied compromise on the "administered" areas. Likud took a more adamant stance, insisting on "direct negotiations" with the Arabs. To be sure, rather than express unqualified opposition to withdrawal Likud simply demanded a "rejection of withdrawals that would endanger the peace and security of the nation." Yet in the case of Begin, Sharon, and other rightist leaders, the alteration in language effected no change in image. While many citizens would vote for Likud to punish the Meir government for the blunders of the recent war, the majority of the nation was not prepared to swing to the Right. Few Israelis believed that Likud's hard-line spokesmen could be trusted to explore all opportunities for peace.

Golda

THE NEW REPUBLIC

On April 10, 1974, with the end of the Yom Kippur War, Golda Meir resigned as prime minister. Four years later she died. This was the occasion for newspapers and magazines all over the world to take

stock of her and her achievements. One such was the American magazine *The New Republic.* Following is its appraisal.

Her life reads like a Hollywood script composed by an overzealous screenwriter bent on producing a spectacular on great moments in contemporary Jewish history. To provide unity the major character, preferably a woman for added poignancy, is placed at the center of all key events. All the required scenes are available: a child cowering in fear of a pogrom in czarist Russia; a girl enjoying the freedom and opportunities of the United States yet determined to become a socialist pioneer in the wastes of Palestine; a young woman suffering extreme poverty and personal hardship in the barren homeland. The heroine of this increasingly improbable scenario—she scrubs laundry by hand to pay for the schooling of her children—is a woman torn by the conventional feminist conflict between the duties of wife and mother and a compelling ideological commitment. Nor is melodrama missing: there is the perilous journey to Amman in 1948, unconvincingly disguised as an Arab woman though she knows no Arabic, when she tries to persuade King Abdullah not to join the Arab attack on Israel. Then there is the incredible shot showing the newly appointed Israeli minister to the Soviet Union engulfed by a mass of supposedly assimilated Russian Jews, who defy the authorities to greet the emissary of the Jewish state in front of a Moscow synagogue. Is this a bit much, perhaps? Later, in depicting the Jewish heroine's audience with the pope, shouldn't the writer have hesitated before giving his heroine the haunting utterance, "I am the daughter of a carpenter?" Finally, why, as a climax, did he present an old, sick woman, now prime minister of the embattled state, in the role of arbiter, obliged to make crucial political and military decisions when her male cabinet ministers and generals were in disarray during the onslaught of the Yom Kippur War? The plot seems extravagant; judicious blue-pencilling clearly would be in order. Yet that's how it was. So obituary comment on Golda Meir runs the danger of indulgence in superlatives made hollow by repetition. But a cautious reduction of her stature would not be closer to the truth.

The line from childhood in Kiev to fulfillment in Jerusalem was direct. There were no deviations in plan or purpose. From the beginning to the end, her convictions had a disarming, and sometimes disconcerting, slogan-like clarity: a persecuted people must be emancipated. Having learned the meaning of independence in the United States, she herself took part in this emancipation. And being a socialist, she strove to build a just society in a Jewish homeland. This terrifying, unswerving simplicity in thought and feeling—her detractors would call it simplistic—was a prime source of Golda Meir's strength. She was spared the doubts and hesitations of more complex or timid natures. In every crisis she refused to be deflected by considerations she dismissed as rationalizations for an unwillingness to face the consequences of a basic belief. No amount of acquired sophistication or temptation to disenchantment could shake her assurance in the purity of her goal and the possibility of its realization. The assurance, allied to shrewd competence, made it possible for her to become both a combative, sometimes ruthless, politician in Israel and a moral force for the Jewish people. She knew not only what she wanted but what should be wanted, and she had a unique power to communicate this knowledge.

At her best she was a remarkably effective speaker. Her best was not on most occasions at the United Nations or on other formal occasions when she had to deliver a carefully prepared address. Then she spoke like her diplomatic colleagues. But when she cast away the prepared text, as she once did at the UN to appeal directly to the Arabs, or in times of peril or triumph when she spoke impromptu to the Israeli multitudes, she had no peer. There were more brilliant stylists among Zionist orators—some deplored her poor Hebrew and elementary English—but her audience was more concerned with her message than with her oratory style. Those who heard her became for a moment selflessly involved in her emotion and her cause.

In the 1940s, when the struggle of Jewish Palestine against the British Mandatory Power was launched, she was the most moving exponent of what seemed a desperate gamble. How could an ill-armed community of 600,000 venture to challenge the British Empire to "open the gates" of Palestine to Jewish survivors? The policy of resistance was formulated by Ben-Gurion, but Golda became its voice. When she declared at village meetings or at kibbutz funerals, "we have no alternative," she meant that people of a given commitment had no alternative. Less dangerous courses could be pursued, such as settling for a modest immigration quota and a permanent minority status for the Jewish community of Palestine. Similarly, when Ben-Gurion advocated the declaration of a state after the passage of the Partition Resolution, though all knew that Arab armies were poised for the invasion of the fledgling country, Golda was among the chief activists. Many devoted Zionists counselled prudence, to avoid imperiling all that had been achieved by four decades of Jewish settlement in a confrontation either with England or the Arab states. Such prudence was alien to both her convictions and her temperament, not because she was foolhardy and ignorant of the immense risk but because the risk to the Jewish people—the betrayal of the Jewish refugees and the Zionist dream—was greater. This attitude dictated her course in the coming decades of struggle.

As a leader of the Histadrut, the Israeli labor federation, she was at first uncompromising in her egalitarian vision. She insisted on the principle of equal pay in the Histadrut regardless of the nature of the work. At one time, the nurses of the federation's health plan, who wanted to receive more pay than charwomen, viewed her as their antagonist. When she was minister to Moscow, she tried to run her office in keeping with the austere principles of the kibbutz tradition. Inevitably these Utopian efforts foundered. In Israel and abroad, outside the kibbutz enclaves, individuals sought rewards in accordance with their skills and their positions. Impassioned but no fanatic, Golda bowed to realism. Yet all her life, the kibbutz cooperative remained her image of the ideal society. That her daughter and grandchildren worked in a Negev desert kibbutz was her special pride. And at international socialist conferences, she appeared to the end as the representative of a progressive trade union movement and of a labor party that, despite the imperfections and concessions of the present, still cherished the dream of a socialist society with a human face.

The idealistic girl matured into an adroit stateswoman, skilled in negotiation, temperate in argument and wonderfully persuasive with the great of the earth. But the granite core remained. Her critics called her short-sighted and inflexible in her insistence on "secure borders" when she became prime minister. They called her indifferent to the plight of the Palestinians—an accusation that she rejected. Her policy was shaped not only by an ideological conviction of the justice of Israel's cause, but by her own experiences. She knew that when she had worked in a malaria-infested kibbutz in the valley of the Jordan, she had made Palestine more habitable for Arabs as well as Jews. She knew that she had called herself a Palestinian at a time when Arabs disdained the designation. And she knew that from 1947 on, she had repeatedly and vainly pleaded for cooperation between Arabs and Jews. Her scepticism about the value of international guarantees derived from the abandonment of Israel by the powers pledged to the state's safety in 1948 and in 1967. Therefore "secure borders" became for her synonymous with Israel's survival.

The Yom Kippur War was the bitterest experience of her long life. This was not only because of Israel's peril, but because for the first time she was made the butt of her people's agony. Her associates were aware of the letters she received from parents blaming her and her ministers for the deaths of their sons. No suffering in her personal life could have equalled her pain at these charges, because in each instance she sorrowed with the bereaved. But the measure of her influence with the Israeli people is that she surmounted the grimness of this period and became revered again in the years before her death.

In a speech she gave before the Six Day War, she declared that her life had been blessed. She enumerated the blessings: the child fearful of pogroms had lived to be the free citizen of an independent Jewish state. Her own children took part in the just society of a kibbutz. Her national and social visions were on the way to fulfillment.

Dying as she did before the hoped-for peace with the Arabs has been achieved, it is hard to be confident that the optimism of this earlier summation of her life had been sustained. And there is the added irony that the peace, if achieved, will be attained by the man against whose social and political policies she fought all her days. But she had too much wry humor not to appreciate the tricks of history, and too much magnanimity where the fate of her people was involved for any personal disappointment to be more than slight.

For many who shared her beliefs but lacked her courage, she was a gadfly. In an intimate sense she was the conscience of the Jewish people. Those who loved her will long remember the deep, firm voice that called to action and the searching eyes that demanded, "where are you?" In 1967, when she saw many young American Jews thronging to help in Israel's defense, she said forthrightly, "You are ready to die with us. Why do you not remain to live with us?" This question tormented her with increasing intensity. Not too long before her death she spoke of plans to come to the United States in behalf of *aliyah,* immigration to Israel. In any case, it is doubtful if even she would have achieved the miracle of stimulating large-scale immigration of American Jews to Israel.

Women throughout the world viewed Golda Meir as an example of what women might accomplish. Americans responded to her homespun, earthy directness. For Israel and the Jewish people she became a mother figure—wise, compassionate and stern when need be. The shrinking pantheon of great national leaders has been further diminished by her passing.

Review and Study Questions

1. What is Zionism?
2. What are kibbutzim and why were they important in the early settlement of Israel?
3. Discuss the Yom Kippur War. How did Meir assess her role and responsibility in the war?
4. What was the role of the United States in the Yom Kippur War? Discuss.

Suggestions for Further Reading

There are several sources of Golda Meir's own writings. Her autobiography, *My Life* (New York: Putnam, 1975) is excerpted in this chapter. Her selected official papers are collected in *This is Our Strength, Selected Papers of Golda Meir,* ed. and intro. Henry M. Christman, foreword Eleanor Roosevelt (New York and London: The Macmillan Co., 1962). There are two editions of *Golda Meir Speaks Out,* ed. Marie Syrkin (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1973) and Golda Meir, *A Land of Our Own, An Oral Autobiography,* ed. Marie Syrkin (New York: Putnam, 1973).

There are several biographies of Meir, widely varying in their sympathy and point of view. Robert I. Friedman, *Zealots for Zion, Inside Israel's West Bank Settlement Movement* (New York: Random House, 1992) is not quite a biography but it does deal with Meir's part in the rancorous West Bank settlement; it is also highly critical. Ralph G. Martin, *Golda: Golda Meir, The Romantic Years* (New York: Scribner, 1988) is an account only through 1948. Thus it is not complete, nor is it a very good account. Peggy Mann, *Golda, The Life of Israel's Prime Minister* (New York: Coward, McCann and Geoghegan, 1971), though it covers events only before 1971, is scrupulously honest and historically accurate. Also limited to events before 1971 is Terry Morris, *Shalom Golda* (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1971), an admiring, brief popular biography. Eliyahu Agress, *Golda Meir, Portrait of a Prime Minister,* tr. Israel I. Taslitt (New York: Sabra Books, n.d.) is a picture book compiled under the auspices of the Israeli government.

To compensate for the lack of treatment of the 1970s in the available biographies there are a number of books on the Arab-Israeli wars, especially the Yom Kippur War. The best is *The Yom Kippur War,* by The Insight Team of the London *Sunday Times* (New York: Doubleday, 1974). Of almost equal authority, and equally well researched is Edgar O'Ballance, *No Victor, No Vanquished, The Yom Kippur War* (San Rafael, Ca., and London: Presidio Press, 1978). *The Yom Kippur War, Israel and the Jewish People,* ed. Moshe Davis (New York: Arno Press, 1974) is a collection of authoritative essays and articles on the war from all over the world. Peter Allen, *The Yom Kippur War* (New York: Scribner, 1982) is a popular book but highly favorable to Israel. Of somewhat larger scope is Trevor N. Dupuy, *Elusive Victory, The Arab-Israeli Wars, 1947–1974* (New York et al.: Harper and Row, 1978), by an established military historian.

There are any number of good general histories of modern Israel. We have excerpted one of them for this chapter, Howard M. Sachar, *A History of Israel, From the Rise of Zionism to our Time* (New York: Knopf, 1976). Amos Perlmutter, *Israel, The Partitioned State, A Political History* *since 1900* (New York: 1985) is also an authoritative work, as is Terence Prittie, *Israel, Miracle in the Desert,* rev. ed. (New York et al.: Praeger, 1968), though it stops short of the topic in this chapter. Lawrence Meyer, *Israel Now: Portrait of a Troubled Land* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1982) is a good, readable general treatment by an experienced journalist.

Useful also are the several biographies and autobiographies of Meir's leading colleagues and fellow Israeli officials. Moshe Dayan, *Story of My Life* (New York: Morrow, 1976) is a case in point. See also the work of his daughter, Yael Dayan, *My Father, His Daughter* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1985) and Shahtai Teveth, *Moshe Dayan* (London and Jerusalem: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1972). See also Abba Eban, *Personal Witness, Israel Through My Eyes* (New York: Putnam, 1992). For America's important role in these events a useful source is the writings of Henry Kissinger, secretary of state under President Nixon. See Henry Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval* (Boston and Toronto: Little, Brown and Co., 1982) and Henry Kissinger, *American Foreign Policy,* 3rd ed. (New York: Norton, 1977).