

Book Review – A State at Any Cost

A State at Any Cost: The Life of David Ben-Gurion

(Tom Segev: Farrar, Strauss, Giroux: 2019)

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During the years Tom Segev was writing his indispensable biography of David Ben-Gurion, *A State at Any Cost*, he records that he was confronted by a Ben-Gurion revival in Israel; new books, plays, films, documentaries about the former prime minister. Many of them looked at him nostalgically, eager to recall a time when Israel's leaders were not personally corrupt, did not see public service as an excuse for private enrichment, and when Israel and "unending moral quagmire" were not yet synonyms. (Ben-Gurion did have an unfortunate habit of making extravagant book purchases on the government's shekel, which is, I must say, for me anyway, the most forgivable of all forms of venality.) And it is certainly true that during Ben-Gurion's era, Zionism, outside of the Arab world of course, had far more lauders than detractors, and Zionism was seen as a progressive cause rather than a rallying cry for reactionaries. But the best way to inoculate oneself against Ben-Gurion nostalgia, in thinking, with Wordsworth's Milton, that Ben-Gurion "shouldst be living at this hour" is to read Segev's book. For those who hope for a new, democratic Israel, let us leave Ben-Gurion interred at Sde Boker.

Although Segev's book has affinities with Israel's "new historians," now a generation old, his main purpose is not a recounting of Israel's sorry history of relations with Palestinian Arabs. Neither is it an effort at debunking nor a catalogue of his flaws and shortcomings, though catalogue them he does, running through most of the seven deadly sins; including at least envy, pride, vanity, and concupiscence. However, one sin Segev does not, and cannot, accuse Ben-Gurion of, is sloth. Ben-Gurion was a force of nature, a machine of perpetual motion and ambition, who accomplished much and who worked tirelessly for the Jewish people at the darkest hours in their long history, his legacy too complex and too consequential for a simple thumbs up or down.

Reading Segev's biography, the books that most came to mind were Robert Caro's studies of political power, i.e., his lengthy biographies of Robert Moses and Lyndon Johnson. Like them, Segev's Ben-Gurion was not particularly likeable, not warm; a man with many associates but few close friends; a suspicious man with many enemies, real and imagined, and he apparently entirely lacked a sense of humor. But like Moses and Johnson, he was a master of the bureaucratic arts. If, as Oscar Wilde was supposed to have said, the problem with socialism was too many evenings, in this way only was Ben-Gurion's socialism not skin-deep. He loved going to meetings, writing memoranda, and explaining his position at great length. Like his fellow power brokers, he was both a great persuader and a great intimidator, able to convince or cajole others into agreeing that his way was the highway, the only way forward, and that all other alternatives were either unworkable or unthinkable.

The way to make sense of Ben-Gurion's contradictions, as Segev suggests, is to subsume them all beneath his life's goal, to create a Jewish state in Palestine and defend that state at all costs, at all odds, against all comers. Born in Plonsk, in Russian Poland, in 1886, coming of age amid the welter of ideologies that coursed through Eastern European Jewry in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, he sampled many, such as socialism and anarchism—the ideology of his wife-to-be Paula Moonweis, when they met—but Zionism was always his north star. Ben-Gurion made aliyah in 1906, found that he wasn't interested or cut out for manual labor or farming, and soon became involved in labor-Zionist politics, though until World War I his main means of support seems to have been money from his father in Plonsk. (Ardent Zionist that he was, he remained quite the Plonsker, returning there numerous times through the 1930s.) Quickly moving up the political ladder, he became, shortly after its founding in 1920, the general-secretary of the Histadrut and, given the absence of other strong institutional structures in the Yishuv, he used his position to amass steadily increasing political power.

Labor for Ben-Gurion meant Jewish labor, and this meant reducing or, preferably, eliminating Arab employment from Jewish enterprises. His socialist principles led, perhaps self-servingly, to the conclusion that since some Jewish landowners were exploiting Arab labor, the socialist solution was not to employ them at all. And this would require defending Jewish settlements against Arab attacks and reprisals. Segev makes clear that at no point in his life did Ben-Gurion have any faith in Jewish-Arab cooperation, nor believed that there could be a peaceful resolution of tensions in Palestine. As he stated in 1914, and reiterated in many ways throughout his life, "one does not receive a country, one conquers it."

Ben-Gurion saw himself as a person of destiny. Segev argues that one of the central events in Ben-Gurion's life was an extended visit to the Soviet Union in 1923 and, though he was neither a Communist nor a fellow traveler, he marveled at what the then-dying Lenin had wrought, "a man who knew how to crawl on his belly in the utter depths to reach his goal, a man of iron who will not spare human life and the blood of innocents for the sake of revolution" and so on. Segev suggests that while he wouldn't or couldn't try to realize his goals with the ruthlessness of a Lenin, he saw his ultimate responsibility not to the Jewish people, as one might suppose, but to his version of the "Zionist Idea."

By the 1930s Ben-Gurion was determined to topple Chaim Weizmann from the leadership of the World Zionist organization, which he proceeded to do, and continued to treat him with considerable pettiness. (Weizmann was in the United States when Israel's independence was declared, and Ben-Gurion deliberately did not leave space for him to sign the Israel's Declaration of Independence.) As for his other great rivals in the 1930s and 1940s, Vladimir Jabotinsky and Menachem Begin; for Segev, their disputes were much ado about not very much. Ben-Gurion and Jabotinsky both wanted a Jewish state on both sides of the Jordan, both of them wrote of an "Iron Wall," and both also promised to protect the civil rights of the Arab minority in a Jewish state. Although they came from very different ideological backgrounds,

Segev asserts that "Jabotinsky was not a fascist any more than Ben-Gurion was a Marxist. Ben-Gurion was no less nationalist or militarist than Jabotinsky. The right-left divide in the Zionist movement was largely a matter of style and modes of operation, not of fundamental values. In the large picture it was a fight over power more than it was over ideas." Segev's account of the Altalena affair, when under Ben-Gurion's command, the newly formed Israel Defense Forces sank, with loss of life on both sides, the Altalena, a ship carrying military supplies to the Irgun (Etzel), is more sympathetic to Begin than Ben-Gurion. Begin had already agreed to place his forces under IDF authority and a compromise could have been worked out with Begin, but Ben-Gurion did not want any challenge to his new authority as prime minister.

Segev seems most interested in Ben-Gurion before 1948 and, indeed, his role in helping to bring Israel into existence is more important than what he did afterwards. I am inclined to give Ben-Gurion a bit more credit than does Segev for his handling of the Holocaust. True, he made a number of stupid statements to the effect that creating a Jewish state was more important than saving refugees, though it is not clear that he really meant them, and he did what he could to rescue Jewish refugees. However, in the end, Ben-Gurion was as powerless as all other Jewish leaders were in confronting the catastrophe. As for the Nakba, Segev gets it right. Through a combination of intention, winks and nods, and allowing events to take their own course if it involved the dispossession of Palestinians, Ben-Gurion got what he wanted, a Jewish state with a relatively insignificant Palestinian minority. And Segev is also correct that what Ben-Gurion wanted for Israel/Palestine was not really Jews but Zionists. Thus, he found the German Jews in the 1930s too German and bourgeois, and after the creation of the state he found Arab Jews too Arab, survivors of the Holocaust too traumatized to be of much use, while the Jews he really wanted to ingather, from the United States, didn't want to come.

As prime minister, Ben-Gurion became, in Segev's words, something of an "Israeli King Lear," given to threats of relinquishing his power without really wanting to relinquish it and, though he indeed established, at least for Israel's Jewish population, a strong democratic tradition, his tenure was erratic, highlighted by terrible misjudgments such as the Lavon affair and the Suez crisis. After '67 his statement that "if I had to choose between a small Israel with peace and a large Israel without peace, I would prefer a small Israel," has sometimes been quoted by peace activists, but Segev argues that "he had always dreamed of possessing the entire Land of Israel, and that continued to be his ultimate wish," even after the Six-Day War

Adam Shatz, an anti-Zionist, in a sharp and biting review of Segev's biography in the *London Review of Books*, concludes that Segev shows that "how central exclusionary nationalism, war and racism were to Ben-Gurion's vision of the Jewish homeland in Palestine, and how contemptuous he was, not only of the Arabs, but of Jewish life outside Zion," and that his former admirers "may look at the state that Ben-Gurion built, and ask if the cost has been worth it."

I don't think that is really the point. Surely the question of whether the creation of Israel was worth the cost of the terrible conditions of its birth

is a discussion not really worth having. Like all shaping events in history, the creation of Israel cannot be wished or counter-factualized away. But I think Segev would argue (seconded by me) that Ben-Gurion was perhaps the key person in the shrinking of mid-20th century Zionism from a plethora of contending possibilities to its dominant minatory and reactionary form today. Begin may have lost the battle of the Altalena, but with Ben-Gurion's help, he won the war.

Let me end on a more positive note. The anecdote that most lingered for me from Segev's 800 pages has nothing to do with the Jews, Palestine, or Israel. When in 1916, Ben-Gurion, in the United States as an emissary for Po'ale Zion, stopped in Nashville, he wrote a friend about life in what he called "the Negro Pale of Settlement"—a great phrase—and how embarrassed and ashamed he was to sit in the front of a Jim Crow trolley car, or having to make use of a whites- only bathroom. When he went to a local movie theater—showing *Birth of a Nation*, perhaps?— in an act of solidarity, he went to sit in the black section, though an usher immediately came and insisted that he relocate himself to the white section. This didn't prevent him, later in life, from worrying about uncivilized blacks from Africa taking over the world, or making that ultimate stupid "trump" argument against Jewish intermarriage to a friend, that after all, you wouldn't want your daughter to marry a black man. Still, his observations from Nashville were impressive, showing that at moments Ben-Gurion's highest aspirations were universal enough to include all peoples and nations in their quest for equality. This is Ben-Gurion (and Zionism) at their best. However, as Segev shows, far too much of contemporary Israel is built on a foundation of Ben-Gurion at his worst. To start again, we must look at Israel's history without apology, and without blinking. There is no better place to start than with Segev's biography.



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