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978-0-521-19748-9 - David Ben-Gurion and the Jewish Renaissance

Shlomo Aronson

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David Ben-Gurion and the Jewish Renaissance

This book offers a reappraisal of David Ben-Gurion's role in Jewish-Israeli history from the perspective of the twenty-first century, in the larger context of the Zionist "renaissance," of which he was a major and unique exponent. Some have described Ben-Gurion's Zionism as a dream that has gone sour, or a utopia doomed to be unfulfilled. Now – after the dust surrounding Israel's founding father has settled, archives have been opened, and perspective has been gained since Ben-Gurion's downfall – this book presents a fresh look at this statesman-intellectual and his success and tragic failures during a unique period of time that he and his peers described as the "Jewish renaissance." The resulting reappraisal offers a new analysis of Ben-Gurion's actual role as a major player in Israeli, Middle Eastern, and global politics.

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This book is dedicated to the memory of Tony Halle, Principal of the New High School in Tel Aviv: An exemplary educator, and my model scholar of history.

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Preface and Acknowledgments

The purpose of this book is to sketch the persona of David Ben-Gurion and interpret some of his feats in a way that departs from the conventional wisdom. This is because the conventional wisdom, for better or worse, is strongly evident in the descriptions of his actions, from the beginning of his career until its apex in the 1930s through the 1960s. My intention, in contrast, is to offer a historical explanation for these actions and probe the man's inner world both before and after this period and, by so doing, to portray a man who combined intellectualism and leadership in a singular way. These two terms require clarification: Even though no one disputes that Ben-Gurion was a leader, the hybrid coinage of "leader-intellectual" is a concept that contemporary readers might dismiss with hardly a thought on the grounds that such trappings do not suit Ben-Gurion, that their depth does not fit his coarse demeanor. If anyone deserves this sobriquet, they would say, it is Ben-Gurion's colleague Berl Katznelson, regarded as the spiritual leader of the mainstream Zionist Labor Movement.

One is tempted to compare and contrast these two figures, yet my aim is to analyze and explain – rather than merely describe – Ben-Gurion's practical pursuits and intellectual interests, particularly those that in my opinion have not been interpreted in the correct light; to set him in his proper place within the Israeli and Jewish history in which he acted; and to define these periods of time and the man who tried to shape them, foiled though he was by historical changes that took place because of his own deeds, as well as the historical processes that transcended any individual's capacity to mold, such as the Holocaust. Yet in spite of many obstacles, Ben-Gurion emerges from this discussion as indeed the founding father of Israel, whose reputation requires a sort of rehabilitation next to his failures. Perhaps his most important failed endeavor was his campaign to reshape the Israeli government system in due course, on the basis of the British constitutional model.

The discussion of the British constitutional model in this book was derived from the basic rules of the British polity in Ben-Gurion's times, notwithstanding

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its well-known political complications, for example, the role of third parties (such as today's Liberal Democrats) that may dictate the results of the general elections. In the case of the post-World War II Labor Party, Roy Jenkins, one of Labor's outstanding figures, tells us¹ that "the relationship of the Labor party machine to the party leadership was both confused and endowed with potential constitutional danger [by machine politicians and leftist members of the Parliamentary Party trying to impose their views on the majority in this body]. It caused considerable difficulty both to Hugh Gaitskell when he was leader of the opposition and to Harold Wilson when he was leader in government." In Ben-Gurion's case, with the proportional ballot and the multiparty system of Israel, much more serious schisms between him as the leader in government and members of the secondary leadership of his party, and later the party's machine, would tear the party apart formally – a result that the British system would hardly have made possible.

The use by Ben-Gurion of the relationship between the political level and the British Army was selective. He avoided the complexities of World War I and the role played by Field Marshal Lord Kitchener as secretary of war during the saga of Gallipoli, among others; the role played by John Fisher, the First Sea Lord, in imposing Winston Churchill's departure from the Admiralty, but also Fisher's own demotion by the political level when Fisher, the sailor, tried to impose himself on a civilian prime minister; and other frictions between generals and elected politicians. He did invoke his own experience as a British Jewish soldier at the time, as we shall see. Churchill, the civilian victor of World War II, remained his hero.

The leader-intellectual is a rare species in our milieu and, in fact, in any circle. Jewish society, it is true, has never been lacking for thinkers, scholars, and men and women of culture. In the Jewish society of Eastern Europe, however, most people were religious – either traditionalists who never doubted their religious values or men who immersed themselves in practicing Jewish rituals. Some fashioned a severe world of moral concepts that views the Chosen People as the people of the Torah, so that anyone who breaches its bounds must be an enemy of the people and the direct cause of the catastrophes that have visited it. Others developed religious moral systems that were almost modern in complexion, for example, Rabbi Yisrael Salanter's Mussar movement. Still others bruited less stringent interpretations of the tragedies that have befallen the Jews, foremost the Holocaust. All, however, subscribed to a value system of religious morality that shaped their world and obliged them, at the very least, to act according to its principles in many different ways.

The era of the Haskala – the Jewish Enlightenment – saw its own varied views of Judaism adopted, including, possibly, its renunciation of tradition to a larger or lesser degree. The Jewish intellectual, however, had many reasons to vacillate over issues of society, state, and ethics, as these themes developed in Czarist Russia and in the West. Thus, our perception of a late nineteenth-century Jewish intellectual such as Ben-Gurion would be one who had broken away from traditional Judaism, who knew the Jews of his era and milieu, who had studied

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in his youth the writings of Spinoza, and who as an adolescent considered himself a philosopher with a future. He would be a practical intellectual beyond his activities as a wheeler and dealer for the Jewish proletariat, the embodiment of the organizational man, and a more (or less) seasoned politician than he is usually perceived as being, as well as a statesman much occupied with tactics and strategy.

Even if we demonstrate that Ben-Gurion was a thinking statesman and a practical intellectual, we still have to explain what he and the self-proclaimed Zionist renaissance have to do with each other. Further, this book deals with the Holocaust and the lessons he drew from it; a variety of internal matters including the debate over an Israeli constitution; the discussion of the moral foundations of a secular Jewish state; and the bitter controversy surrounding the “Lavon Affair,” a political scandal that brought about his decline and fall. The treatment of important aspects of foreign affairs and defense departs from the conventional wisdom, especially in respect to the decision to embark on Operation Kadesh (the Suez-Sinai Campaign of 1956), the creation of Israel’s nuclear infrastructure, the relations between Israel and Germany, the buildup to the 1967 Six Day War, and the debate over its outcomes.

The tie that binds all these issues is Ben-Gurion as a leader-intellectual. In his prime, he could be considered a Renaissance man because he dealt in all types of fields, some cultural and humanistic, others scientific and ethical. However, it is not my intention to use the term in this simplistic, aphoristic sense. Instead, I intend to show that the man was the product of a period in Jewish history in Eastern Europe and later in Palestine that somewhat resembled the European Renaissance in its intellectual and practical essence.

Many people of Ben-Gurion’s time were modern in terms of the complexity of their personalities, their needs, and the issues that occupied them. Ben-Gurion was a complex person, too, but he was not troubled by the quandaries, issues, and difficulties that disturbed the peace of mind of, for example, his friend Berl Katznelson. As his biographers show, Katznelson was a modern man whose Zionism was only one part of his anguished personality, though it was the main component of his public life and an important element in a heart ridden with doubt, guilt, loyalty to Jewish religious life, emptiness, and alienation, as well as criticism of self and of others.

In contrast, Ben-Gurion lived with the social problems of his time, knew well its grand ideologies, took interest in the scientific achievements of his era, and, to the best of his ability, learned from others about systems of government and political and military matters. He was less provincial than Katznelson, who made Herbert Samuel, the British Jew who served as High Commissioner of Palestine, into a sort of Pontius Pilate and conflated villainous ancient Greece and Hadrian’s empire with contemporaneous reality. Ben-Gurion was also less literary, living less than his friend in the idiomatic world of Hebrew poetry and European verse as the vernacular of realities in Palestine/Israel, though he was much occupied with that world and drew a great deal from it. He sought to learn from ancient Greece, to delve as much as he could into the writings of

Plato, to study the Bible and the scientific Jewish historiosophy of his time, and to resort again to Spinoza. Ben-Gurion, however, also tried to be a creative, active person, one whose heart, unlike Katznelson's, was not terribly torn. Both men were very critical and very positive people, but Ben-Gurion was free of Katznelson's inner struggles, and in their absence it is hard for us to see Ben-Gurion as a full-fledged modern man.

Truth to tell, modernity can be a creative, active, optimistic, intellectual, and scholastic quality that draws ideas from the Greek and Roman classicists, as we know from the eighteenth century. Furthermore, the European Enlightenment, which ostensibly originated in that century, undoubtedly had much influence on the Maskilim – Jews who were exposed to and adopted the traits of the European Enlightenment – and their Eastern European Zionist successors. However, perplexities, doubts, and ethical and intellectual difficulties that can be traced to the crisis of Western civilization had already eroded the “modernity” of the late nineteenth century, in consequence of complex social and economic processes and in the face of persistent attacks by science on all religious truth and tradition at large. The secularization of religious values that modern thinkers distractedly launched in the eighteenth century – as if it were obvious for many that Man is a rational and good creature from birth, from which premise his social and political way of life should follow as a paradise on earth – had become, by the end of the nineteenth century, simplistic and outmoded in the eyes of many. Therefore, many people of that era were particularly envious and fond of the Renaissance, for it neither simplified matters, as the scholars of the eighteenth century did, nor devised social theories, all-embracing pretensions, or political doctrines, that is, precise guidelines for statecraft and governance. The Renaissance was known for its creative, optimistic, externalized character, which did not intrude on people's inner lives but, rather, saw life as an “act of art” – and not only the oeuvre of a Leonardo or a Machiavelli. For many, the Renaissance was the worldview of a unique era that saw beauty, ability, creativity, and modern depth in life and in man, freed from the challenges posed by human impulse and its murky aspects. This view of the world was not only spurned during the periods preceding the Renaissance but was also resisted with full fury, locking man's mind and senses behind bars of faith, fear, and inevitable sin.

A hallmark element in the Renaissance is the liberation of man and the reconciliation of man with nature. Its function is to restore classical Man to his former glory – without harming the tenets of religious faith by which people lived, even though, in fact, they departed from them in many directions. Two such directions were the rediscovered sciences and the newly discovered continents that were being settled, resulting in the development of an enormous interest in other cultures and in consolidating national entities that had been conceived in the Middle Ages. The offspring of the Renaissance swerved from the principles of religious faith without a modern theoretical understanding of what they were doing, without inner vacillations of the modern sort, and without concern about the outrageousness of conflating ideas from the distant

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and recent past with those newly propounded. Since such a conflation is found in the Zionist theories of Ben-Gurion's era, it is easy today to condemn them in the name of modern and postmodern approaches and in the name of religion. Just the same, this mix of issues remains a historical fact that no criticism can gainsay.

The European Renaissance was no easy time. In Italy, for example, the centuries of transition between the Middle Ages and the new era were filled with wars, plagues, and moments of social and personal insecurity. People's lives remained short and often strewn with troubles and pitfalls. Meanwhile, people's attitudes toward the intrinsic worth of their own lives and toward nature underwent substantial change. Renaissance people lifted their heads and freed their spirit, and that spirit burst forth – for better or worse – at the expense of previously accepted patterns and methods of thought and behavior. They turned to earlier eras and their cultures – Classicism, ancient languages, philosophy, and rhetoric – and inserted them into the history of their time without causing this history to shatter.

There is no doubt that late nineteenth-century secular Zionists sought to shatter traditions, modes of conduct, and beliefs and opinions that they viewed as constraints, prejudices, and genuine menaces to their people and themselves. However, they wrapped this undoing in classical sources – that is, the Hebrew language, the Bible, Eretz Israel (the Land of Israel), and nature – producing a revolution in worldview that, in my opinion, was not complete because it pretended to be a “renewal” rather than a revolution. Similarly, the “negation of exile” that Ben-Gurion's Zionist contemporaries stressed became a psychological and political necessity for its exponents, even though their attachment to the European Diaspora and its significances remained firm until the European Diaspora was destroyed.

This shattering of old ways of thinking, in the eyes of Ben-Gurion and his contemporaries, had a decidedly socialist character that was totally absent in the European Renaissance. Yet even this emphasis on egalitarianism and manual labor was tied to classic sources: the prophetic writings and the Jewish ethical requirements, though without religious faith. These Zionists sought to fulfill religious commandments and sustain a unique, historic nation, but at a remove from the nation's erstwhile way of life, on the grounds that this way of life doomed the nation to a living death. Viewing the products of Judaism with a concurrent blend of condescending pity, esteem, and deep affection, they played the role of trailblazers with the self-confidence of a generation freed from the previous generations' shackles. This is particularly true of Ben-Gurion himself.

In this book, I propose that the totality of Ben-Gurion's life-work flowed from trends of thought, historical ideas, and his realization that their survival was not assured. He and his peers blended them into a variegated Zionist theory. Some developed them into structured philosophies, such as the Marxist version of Zionism, each according to his own approach, while others, including Ben-Gurion and Katznelson, refrained from proposing overly set theories,

instead striking a consensus on several basic universalistic and Zionist-Socialist-Jewish principles. Ben-Gurion continued to develop his thinking (though some in our generation maintain that he progressively narrowed his thinking) as an outgrowth of the momentously changing reality of his times, the setting in which one should seek the common thread that binds his actions. Some would say that he regressed from revolutionary to conservative or from a successful revolutionary to an incorrigible establishmentarian.

The common thread that I propose tackles the task of defining what was revolutionary in Ben-Gurion's Zionism. He and his peers invoked the concept of a "Zionist renaissance." The European Renaissance, after all, was not a revolution but rather a conflation of the old, which had been held illegitimate for centuries, with the extant and the new. The Zionist renaissance, too, as formulated by Katznelson and Ben-Gurion, was not a revolution of culture and values in the full sense of the expression. Both men sought neither to reject Judaism nor to jettison most of its values but to revive it and give it a secular meaning. They did not begin history anew, from the point at which they stood, as did the exponents of the French Revolution. They saw in history an objective reality on behalf of which they wished to speak; they sought to preserve some of its values in their own way. They acknowledged various and different interpretations among Jews and, by so doing, refrained from committing history to a deterministic Zionist posture while fighting to make their version the "winning" one. What they did not see in history was a source of "scientific" duty that they were bound to fulfill. But if their aim was the revival of Judaism and some of its values, then let us bear in mind that the term *renaissance* denotes rebirth, not revolution. Indeed, the term *Renaissance* was applied to that era only later in history; its contemporaries were not consciously concerned about what was happening to them at the time. Therefore, all historical comparisons with the Renaissance – or with any other period, for that matter – entail strict limits.

Ben-Gurion was well aware of the meaning of his actions, the ethical and cultural foundation for which was established in his character, by his upbringing and education acquired through years of great intellectual effort. This foundation was derived from the world of a Jewish society standing at the crossroads of many options: to desist, disappear, and assimilate into the nations of the world; to persist as a minority in worlds belonging to others, maintaining a religious or historical-cultural identity within these worlds; or to engineer a rebirth in Eretz Israel. For Berl Katznelson, the spiritual leader of Labor Zionism, for Chaim Nachman Bialik, the poet of Zionism, and for others, "rebirth" was a linguistic, cultural, and sociopolitical matter. In Katznelson's thinking, for example, the political aspect related to the Labor Movement. For Ben-Gurion, it was much, much more. His approach toward the question of rebirth was political ab initio. Ultimately, the tidings that Theodor Herzl – the founding father of political Zionism – brought to Zionists everywhere concerned not just the revival of the Hebrew language, culture, and literature but also the rebirth of Jewish sovereignty in the Jewish homeland, so that Jewry could govern itself

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as a viable national entity and would be worthy of so doing. This cause, “auto-emancipation,” was a question of political culture. Consequently, the survival of Judaism in its struggle against massive historical-cultural forces and the justification for its survival; the recruitment of messages from its religious culture in the service of a secular Jewish society; the use of statehood to assure Jewish survival in a world of unrecognizable changes; the moral justification of acts of state; the criticism and proper supervision of these actions during war and prolonged conflict; the securing of support from a public unused to sovereign rule, a collective whose ethno-cultural makeup was in constant flux – all these were concrete issues that occupied Ben-Gurion until the end.

To resolve them, one should follow two common threads. One originates in a thinking leader, a student and a scholar, that is, a leader-intellectual. The second flows from the era of which Ben-Gurion was a product. Although a man of his times, Ben-Gurion stood on his own merit, “one of a kind in his generation,” as his admirers and flatterers called him in his prime. For he allowed himself, consciously and as deeply as possible, to stamp the Jewish rebirth with his own individualistic, autonomous interpretation, one that assuredly included ideas borrowed from the thinking of others and the approaches and experiences of other peoples, alongside those that stemmed from his initial thinking and the changes in the reality of his times. Katznelson, in contrast, though greatly influenced by non-Jews, remained locked in the timeless Jewish culture, forever seeking cultural meaning for a Jewish synthesis that would fit the “New Jew” that he hoped to create in Eretz Israel. Ben-Gurion also spoke abundantly about the New Jew but wove into it the influences of non-Jews in the political realm in the broadest sense of the term – including the concept and form of the system of government for a sovereign Jewish society. For this purpose, he waged rhetorical war and made political compromises when necessary, though at his height and a fortiori at the end of his days, he always retained the last word. An intellectual, independent, autonomous, free man owes nothing to anyone – not to popes, not to plutocrats or tyrants, not to thinkers or intellectuals he disagreed with, not to media moguls, and not even to world leaders. Politically, Ben-Gurion owed a great deal to others and even pursued compromises on more than one occasion, as far as his fiery, explosive, disputatious personality allowed. Intellectually, however, he was truly a free man in a way that only extraordinary historical periods allow a man to be. He had an excellent facility for studying the world as it is – not only as it is supposed to be or as it should be.

This unusual freedom is recognizable in many great Renaissance figures, the most important of whom was the political philosopher Niccolò Machiavelli. But in proclaiming themselves to be the sons and daughters of a Jewish renaissance, Ben-Gurion and his peers tried at least to see reality as it was in order to change it, as this was preached by many during the Renaissance. This is in contrast to the Enlightenment century, which sought to fashion a revolutionary reality through the power of beliefs and opinions – some of them very inflexible – about human nature, and to lead man to a universalistic paradise by this

trait alone. The Renaissance did not delve much into the question of human nature; thus, it was spared many doctrines that seek to fashion the future direction of society and political life by whatever means, including force.

The Jewish renaissance was definitely influenced by beliefs and doctrines that originated in the Enlightenment and its successor century, the nineteenth. Ben-Gurion himself was influenced by them. The Renaissance man in him, however, could not wear any particular doctrinaire robe for long. His Socialism was a combination of classical Jewish and universalistic values coupled with the needs of the Jewish and Israeli society of his time. Yet even here, the man was free of dogmatic shackles and acted in view of the empirical reality of his era and of Israeli society. Since he was a product of his time, Socialist Zionism remained at the foundation of his philosophy and in his thinking, even as he tried to ignore and excuse the inescapable contradiction between freedom and equality. Equally, however, he was able to acknowledge the power of profit as a tool for economic development and to allow it, too, to build Israeli society and provide a livelihood for its members. This aside, Ben-Gurion was a very critical leader of his people in the Diaspora and in Israel, even when he presumed to lead them to the last secure stop in their wanderings, lauding various achievements though he himself was unsure of their ultimate success and the Jews' ability to sustain them in the long term. These favorable and critical dimensions troubled him all his life – the former arising from faith and determination, the latter from observation and doubt; the former flowing from the positive imperatives of leadership, the latter from leadership's need to deter, warn, and educate. Here, then, is the leader of a unique democratic society in the twentieth century, whose actions we must not try to wedge into a simplistic "Renaissance" framework.

Instead, let us try to redefine *renaissance* as an extraordinary historical trend of thought, of psychology, and of behavior that allowed its adherents intellectual freedom of a kind not experienced before or after, a freedom that doctrinarians – both religious and secular – later presented as heresy. The content of the Renaissance was a wonderful blend of values from diverse worlds that had been hitherto disparate until they erupted from the catacombs of the Middle Ages. They were the values of the Greek rationalists, the Roman classicists and statesmen, and Christianity, including values culled from Judaism – foremost the freedom to pick and choose among them and combine them. This act of mingling is not modern because it lacks a reflexive and introspective basis, an aspect of rummaging through the human psyche and confronting its darker depths. It does comprise a wondrous illumination of the psyche, splendid manifestations of the physical, and the beginning of an investigation into the secrets of nature. But that era lacked all manifestation of the modern "angst" and offered no established "scientific" method with which "reason" would discover social laws. Modern thought along this line would have to wait until the seventeenth century. At the beginning of the twentieth century there was no such wondrous integration in the realms of form and content. Nevertheless, Ben-Gurion's refusal to heed the "angst mongers" among Israeli intellectuals

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due to their vacuity – from the very outset of statehood – and his battle with exponents of various scientific “isms” – both dogmatic Marxists and those on the Right who began to slide into Fascism – had an element of the charm and intricate simplicity of the Renaissance.

Ben-Gurion’s particular interest in ancient Greece and the theories of state that it had fathered was markedly unusual and eventually served as political ammunition against him. Just as Greece had been a source of inspiration for the European Renaissance, so the Bible became a renewed source of inspiration for the Zionists of Ben-Gurion’s generation. The integration of Greece and the Bible, however, was characteristic of Ben-Gurion alone. He did, on occasion, see the British as the heirs to the evil Roman Empire, especially when they wavered between the Arabs and the Jews during the 1920s and 1930s; this is why he and Katznelson leveled such a rich variety of accusations against them. Ben-Gurion, however, also contemplated the British men of state at the Saint James’s Conference – which led to the British decision to jettison the Jews in favor of the Arabs in May 1939 – from the inquisitive perspective of a political thinker and not just that of a Zionist propagandist. Katznelson, in contrast, saw that select elite as the rulers of an incorrigibly heinous, antagonistic nation of *goyim*. Ben-Gurion could shower them with invective, do what he could to reverse their decrees, and concurrently learn what he needed to learn from them by constantly studying the changes that they and the British political constellation had undergone during World War II, and by trying to change or adapt his policies to the demands of the changing situation. Katznelson’s attitude toward the Arabs – whom he initially viewed as other than the source of the conflict, which he blamed solely on the British Mandatory government – evolved into simple enmity. Ben-Gurion understood the reasons for the Arabs’ animosity and developed various tactics with which to deal with them, directly and indirectly. Yet he always insisted that at the end of the day – a very long day – a “Jewish–Arab alliance” would arise.

All of this is to say that Ben-Gurion was a statesman in a world of forces that had to be learned, researched, and struggled with for the purpose of creating a new order. The order at issue was not an irreconcilable war between nations, the sort that developed in Europe in the eighteenth century as a consequence of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution, but a *sui generis* historical act: the repatriation of a nation/non-nation in a land that it had left thousands of years previously. Ben-Gurion’s way of thinking was to acknowledge the singularity of this history, the changes that had transpired, and the opportunities squandered hitherto, which the Jewish people would now have to exploit to the utmost in order to change that history to the greatest possible extent.

Ben-Gurion did not deal in prophecy and did not believe in deterministic fortune-telling. His world was much more open than it seemed during those times when his position required him to speak in the name of the past and to commit the future to its vows. That is why it is very important to distinguish between Ben-Gurion’s rhetoric and his methodology as a statesman, between things he said publicly and things he said privately.

He was undoubtedly a staunch believer in the values of the past, but he did not busy himself at first, as did Katznelson, with the question of whether the new Jewish society in Eretz Israel, and particularly its youth, would remain lacking in Jewish culture and traditional Jewish values that had to be preserved, if secularized. Katznelson was troubled about such issues because for most of his life, these areas were the concern of the intellectual leader of the Zionist Labor Movement. At that time, Ben-Gurion's aims lay elsewhere. His Zionism, while striving to make Jews into workers returning to productive labor in their land, aspired above all to make them free citizens, a people capable of sovereign rule. Therefore, the essence of the Jewish national identity seemed self-evident, whereas the moral-political problem that Ben-Gurion increasingly perceived after the Holocaust and the establishment of statehood was the nature of the secular values that a Jewish state should have – an issue of content and modes of conduct that now had to be changed. How interesting it is that he of all men – who more than anyone else seems to have created the *Yishuv* system with its leaders, faults, and *modi operandi* – sought to tackle this problem above all others.

From the historical standpoint, one must stress that Ben-Gurion was only one of the leaders of the *Yishuv*, certainly not the only one, and often not even the one with the most authority. Only time made him the leader of the pack. He was graced with a quality unusual among politicians: the ability to learn, infer, and draw operative conclusions from the changes that he and those of his era experienced. This ability contributes to the depiction of Ben-Gurion as a leader-intellectual. Hence, at a later stage, he invoked “justice” as the main trait of Judaism and messianic hopes and inspiration as the dimensions of Jewish civilization that should be acknowledged and blended together with the proper reform of Israel's government system.

Ben-Gurion sought to meld the old with the new and animate the most incessant changes possible. Others – those of other times and from other backgrounds – found it hard to understand his motives, his ideas, and his energy, as well as their expression in practical affairs. They considered his unceasing innovation an act of coercion, an unwarranted if not ludicrous intellectual hubris, and reactionism rather than progress – his refusal to understand modern life and a retreat into an old world deficient of meaning. Some of this criticism – the problem of the moral and cultural content of Israeli society – remains problematic to this day.

Ben-Gurion pledged himself to the study of this question through his own intellectual prism while being embroiled in an enormous number of existential, legislative and governmental issues – including the Lavon Affair – to an extent that leaves one astonished at the thought of one man's dealing with them all, one after the other and at once. This book reflects the multifarious nature of his dealings, especially in the second half of the twentieth century.

Nevertheless, the account that follows has not necessarily lauded Ben-Gurion's successes in matters of internal governance, internal politics, and security and diplomacy. He was emphatically unique. His demarches were

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unconventional for his time. Some succeeded, such as the preparations for statehood and the decision to declare it; some have been controversial since Israel's War of Independence; some, such as Ben-Gurion's acts of commission and omission during the Holocaust, are described today as practical and moral failures; and some went up in the smoke of the Lavon Affair and its aftermath in the 1960s until the Six Day War, a war that he opposed. However, it was Ben-Gurion himself who established with his own hands the political instrument – the Rafi Party – that allowed his followers, such as General Moshe Dayan, to gradually make radical changes in approach from the one that he himself pursued until 1967. Over time, objections to the “Bolshevik” character of the state he established, of his old party Mapai, and of Ben-Gurion himself were added to his fading laurels, as if he had been some sort of Jewish Lenin. Unlike the founding fathers of “healthier and quieter peoples than ourselves,” as he himself once declared in a discussion with the commanders of the left-nationalist Palmach units in the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), Israel's founding father became a kind of pariah, the root of all the incurable evils of contemporaneous Israeli society. He has been criticized for his “tyranny” for refusing to adopt an American-style constitution for Israel, exempting the ultra-Orthodox from military service, imposing military government on the Israeli Arabs, treating the 1948 Palestinian refugees as he did, deciding to launch the Suez Campaign in 1956, and so on. In his day, these criticisms were heard from his political opponents; today they emanate from their spiritual heirs and the offspring of newer ages, who blame the difficulties of the present and its concepts on the past.

Yet what is needed is an attempt to connect the various dimensions of Ben-Gurion's feats with the ways in which he conducted himself – that same independence of decision making and relentless striving toward changing goals that is often simply called “leadership,” “personal charisma,” and the like but is viewed by others as tyranny and authoritarianism.

As we have said, this is a historical explanation, not just a historical description within the broadest possible historical context. Some today consider historical explanations misguided or impossible. The writer of these lines believes it possible to bring history alive even after it has become history. There is great value in history's being written by its contemporaries or by those who knocked on its doors before they slammed shut, provided that they have access not only to historical imagination but also to primary sources and the necessary critical faculties to study them. “Historical imagination,” however, implies taking the liberty of comparing historical periods, that is, contemplating history through a comparative prism. Indeed, some of the explanation for Ben-Gurion's leadership, it seems to me, was his sense of history as reflected in his activities, based on the knowledge of history and the comparative study of history that taught him similarities and differences. To get to know such a personality (Churchill and de Gaulle were leaders of this type, notwithstanding their differences), a historian must make historical comparisons that seem artificial on the surface or simply metaphoric. Yet since Ben-Gurion and his peers perceived themselves

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to be Renaissance people, some comparisons between this self-perception and the European Renaissance may be justified. Moreover, in my opinion, such periods truly have uniqueness, a flavor, and accomplishments whose particularity cannot be grasped by their immediate successors, especially if they took place at a time that was already quite modern and has now become “postmodern.”

The aim of this book, therefore, is to give posterity a bit of the flavor of this period in Jewish history and to describe its limitations and difficulties, assuming that this generation is willing to accept them. It is a job that no artist can do, no matter how great an author he is. It is a truly daunting task that entails multiple talents such as those of the great painters in history, even though few of them were capable of both painting and historical analysis. Nevertheless, there are historians whose style and fluidity of prose and diction lighten the reader’s burden and make his or her study an esthetic pleasure. Since Ben-Gurion was a man of diverse interests, the task of integrating them into an artistic, fluent, readable biography, as is expected these days for works on even the most complex personalities, is beyond me.

Thus, instead of unveiling one more biography of Ben-Gurion, I have written a monograph that deals with various practical aspects of his leadership and attempts to explain them. The question is whether the Zionist renaissance was nothing more than a common manifestation of nineteenth-century European nationalism; whether it was not a return to roots of the sort that other peoples underwent at that time, reviving ancient languages or reinventing them almost from scratch in order to create a personal identity for themselves in the nationalist era; or whether it was nothing but an ordinary ethnic-cultural-nationalistic phenomenon that mobilized ancient terms and tools for modern necessities. My answer will be that Judaism is indeed a unique phenomenon; it has been a national culture since its inception in classical times, and it maintained its national singularity during the Middle Ages in its own characteristic way. This is why the “renaissance” of Judaism as a nationality has been sown with historical meaning from the outset. The rekindling of this development was fated to wait for the proper circumstances but is not mainly a modern invention.

As a historical, cultural, and behavioral entity riddled with contrasting components, Judaism was an aberration well before the period of European nationalism; for this reason, it became the target of criticism by universalistic opponents of nationalism before and during the European Enlightenment. Its great struggle with other outlooks and cultures was not just a religious conflict but, rather, a clash with modern approaches toward the question of nationalism itself, both to its right and to its left. Consequently, Ben-Gurion’s contemporaries had to struggle for the soul of Judaism as he viewed it, in a world that had many opponents and few friends. Ben-Gurion had to do battle outwardly and act inwardly to give real meaning to the aspirations that pounded in the hearts of impassioned young people who wrestled among various choices for the future of Judaism, of which Zionism was only one and sometimes the least fitting of them all.

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While the Renaissance swept whole generations and imbued them with a dominant spirit, the enthusiasm of Ben-Gurion and his peers for it was not shared by many of his contemporaries. This, however, is the key to understanding terms such as “man of authority” and “sword-wielding prophet.” Our subject was a self-proclaimed Renaissance man in an unstable modern world that seemingly confronted innumerable ideals, challenges, and risks; a minority leader at a time when the majority was mired in its various fates and worlds, amid a dispersed, fragmented people whose very definition as a people demands inquiry.

Part of this puzzle is the Holocaust, an event that silenced many Zionists of its generation, either crippling them emotionally – perhaps another explanation for Katznelson’s decline at so young an age – or infusing them, as commonly found in the Zionist Right, with a spirit of mobilization and action whether they understood their reality or not, to the detriment of Zionist interests in the eyes of Jews and non-Jews at the time. Ben-Gurion’s ability to act while methodically and diligently studying current reality, even during this cataclysm, recalls the actions of other figures of his type, whose Renaissance spark continued to flicker within them during plagues, devastations, and innumerable wars, and who continued to strive without losing their faith in mankind. A skeptical, nondoctrinaire faith of this kind was a facet of Ben-Gurion’s personality despite all the disappointments and failures of Judaism, including Zionism, not only in respect to the dictates of his leadership. For this reason, he had not only the constitution of a political organizer and manipulator but also that of a propagandist, an apologist, and a debater of public issues in countless and diverse circles. He had the strength to advance step by step toward his goals as he prioritized them, not only to accumulate organizational power but also aggressively to persuade, explain, and preach, powered by his skeptical belief in the ability of mankind to understand the reality in which it lives.

“Skeptical faith” is unquestionably the right term for Ben-Gurion’s way of thinking during most of his life, since his contemplation of people convinced him that man is more than merely a rational being. Because he found this eighteenth-century claim simplistic, he cannot be viewed as a doctrinaire leftist. However, he was definitely a moderate leftist – a social democrat in a world in which Zionist social democracy had become a militant alternative to the grand ideologies of the Right and the far Left. None of these existed during the European Renaissance, but Ben-Gurion inherited from the Jewish renaissance, as he preached it, that special spirit and inherent justification for his actions that had been blurred in the hearts of others, or forgotten altogether, or had changed too quickly from an approach striving for change, improvement, and constant learning of lessons to a style of action suited for settled times and the routines of ordinary daily life. This was Moshe Sharett’s approach when he temporarily succeeded Ben-Gurion, and it was also that of Levi Eshkol, another successor. Thus, the discord between these two men and Ben-Gurion was a true rift between the spirit of leadership and the content issues of

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government – between ferment, learning, and pursuit of change and continuation that cannot rest on laurels, on the one hand, and routine, on the other.

His Zionism was a *Zeitgeist* or one of several that visited the Jewish street in Ben-Gurion's time. If we ignore it, we cannot properly understand what the man accomplished. All we can do is analyze this spirit to the best of our ability and portray its manifestations in several intellectual and political acts. We can memorialize it since, after all, it did become a monument even as an object of scorn and disregard, loathing, and anger that the very same spirit combated most of its days with some degree of success.

This book, originally published in Hebrew by the Ben-Gurion Institute of the Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, was adopted and nursed by Dr. Tuvia Friling, then-Director of the Ben-Gurion Archives at the Institute and subsequently Archivist of the State of Israel, from a series of articles that I published in the Israeli newspaper *Ha'aretz*. By “nursed,” I refer to constant help and moral and practical support without which the research and the writing would have been impossible. It was also thanks to Dr. Friling that I was able to recruit Mr. Razi Yahel of Sede Boqer to do the archival research on the early history of the IDF. Some of it is being published here in English for the first time, among other primary sources translated from the Hebrew. The readers of the original Hebrew manuscript, Professor Moshe Lissak of Hebrew University and Professor Yosef Gorny of Tel Aviv University, augmented my initial efforts with their good advice and profound knowledge. However, I alone am responsible for the final results. Dr. Michael Greenberger of the Hebrew Section and Dr. Lester I. Vogel of the Visiting Scholars Program of the Library of Congress made my research at the library both enjoyable and useful.

Much of the translation into English and the updating work of the original Hebrew version were done during my three-year visiting Professorship at the Judaic Studies Center, University of Arizona, Tucson. I am very much indebted to Professor W. Edward Wright, the Director, and to his colleagues, for their continued support, help, and generosity during my stay. Professor David Graizbord was very helpful in discussing the European Renaissance, but I alone am responsible for the outcome. The Hebrew University of Jerusalem contributed its share to the funding of my research, also making it possible for me to hire the services of Mr. Naftali Greenwood, my devoted translator. I am also grateful for the good services of my outstanding copy editor, Mrs. Phyllis L. Berk. The Littauer Foundation, New York, was extremely kind in granting me the necessary funding for the production of the book. I am also indebted to Ms. Jacqueline Goldstein, New York, and the American Friends of the Hebrew University for their support. Mr. Lewis Bateman, my editor at Cambridge, was and remains a careful, solid, vigilant, and critical friend.

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