



Shlomo Aronson. *David Ben-Gurion and the Jewish Renaissance*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011. xxii + 454 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-19748-9.

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## David Ben-Gurion: A Statesman of the Book and the Sword

Shlomo Aronson's study joins a series of works focusing on David Ben-Gurion's leadership. Underlying some of these is the assumption that Ben-Gurion's strong suit was in the political-practical arena, as expressed in his organizational skill, the wisely used power he accumulated, and his mobilization of chance occurrences in favor of Zionist causes. Some claim that Ben-Gurion's political course was essentially pragmatic, that he adapted policy to changing circumstances, and used sudden opportunities at the expense of preserving ideological principles.[1] Yet others emphasize Ben-Gurion's ideological streak as a major drive for his politics, perceiving this aspect of his personality as the key to understanding his actions.[2]

Aronson attempts to portray Ben-Gurion's character by offering an unusual historical explanation for his inner world and actions beginning with the 1930s. Aronson's goal is to analyze and explain the actions and intellectual interests of Ben-Gurion—whom he regards as an exceptional intellectual-leader, a "renaissance man"—in Jewish and Israeli historical context. He describes these periods and the man who attempted to shape them, and who was eventually rejected due to historical changes that occurred as a result of his own actions, and as a consequence of historical processes that far exceeded the control of a single individual.

Aronson discusses the concepts "politician," politics, and "statesmanship" within the Jewish-Israeli context and in the wider framework in which the Zionists operated (i.e., in the relationship of Jews and Israelis with others). He attempts to explain the complexity of these relationships as they evolved from the beginning of Zionism through the 1930s, the Holocaust, and its aftermath, and to describe the lessons Ben-Gurion learned from them. Through all of these Ben-Gurion is depicted in the book as an "intellectual leader." At the height of his days, he could have been called a "renaissance man" since he engaged in various different arenas, in spiritual, cultural,

scientific, and moral matters. According to Aronson, Ben-Gurion lived in an era of Jewish history which to a certain extent resembled, intellectually and behaviorally, the European Renaissance. Ben-Gurion was eager to learn from ancient Greece, contemplating Plato's writings as much as possible; he also studied the Bible and contemporary scientific Jewish historiography, as well as Spinoza. At the same time Ben-Gurion wanted to weave all of these influences together to construct himself as a coherent creative and active person. Ben-Gurion's actions were a result of the zeitgeist and historical events, which were translated by members of his generation into varied manifestations of the Zionist philosophy.

Ben-Gurion and his contemporaries' sequel to the Renaissance was not a quintessentially ideological-cultural revolution. Rather than wishing to turn their backs on Judaism and relinquish most of its values, these Zionists wanted to revive them and endow them with secular meaning. They did not restart history, as did the people of the French Revolution. They wished to preserve some of the values with which they identified and to discard the rest. In fact, it is fit to speak of a "renaissance" when speaking of the rejuvenation of Judaism and some of its values, since the word means "revival" rather than "revolution." Ben-Gurion was aware of the significance of his actions, whose ideological and cultural foundation was derived from his personality, upbringing, and the education he had accumulated over years of great intellectual effort. This foundation drew from the world of the Jewish society that stood at a historical crossroads. The options were to assimilate thoroughly and thus disappear among others; maintain an existence as a minority in the worlds of others while preserving a distinct religious or historical-cultural identity; or generate a revival in the Land of Israel. Aronson associates various aspects of Ben-Gurion's actions with his decisiveness and consistent striving toward goals, which some people simply

call “leadership” or “personal charisma” and others view as authoritarianism and tyrannical behavior.

The first chapter, “The Intellectual Origins of Ben-Gurion’s Zionism,” deals with Ben-Gurion as a model of the free renaissance leader, who is intellectually autonomous and independent of other powerful men, including international leaders as well as intellectuals, scholars, and influential people in the press with whom he disagreed. Chapter 2, “The Holocaust and Its Lessons,” describes the period in which the Jewish people were caught up in a desperate situation. At the beginning of World War II, the leaders of the West did not concern themselves with the Holocaust. It was taking place far from their reach and far from their realm of comprehension. Ben-Gurion believed that it was important to remain independent and that it was a mistake for a people to build their future and chances for survival during periods of trial and severe crises on the willingness of powerful countries—even enlightened and democratic ones—to come to its rescue every time, in all circumstances, and at any price. This approach led him to lay the foundations of a campaign stressing the connection between the lessons of the Holocaust and the role of the nuclear option in Israel’s security policy.

In chapter 3, “Ben-Gurion between Right and Left,” Aronson addresses Ben-Gurion’s fluctuations between the two sides of the political map, striving to bring about changes among a fragmented people and in a *Yishuv* based on voluntary principles, where the tools of enforcement were still embryonic. In the next three chapters, “Ben-Gurion and the Israel Defense Forces—From Formation to the Suez-Sinai Campaign of 1956,” “From the 1956 War to the ‘Lavon Affair,’” and “From the ‘Lavon Affair’ to the Six-Day War,” Aronson shows the connection between the three wars that occurred in the first three decades of statehood and the link between these wars and Ben-Gurion’s concern that the embryonic state would never reach adulthood.

In the concluding chapter, and particularly in its final sentences, Aronson takes leave of his book’s protagonist. The idea of departure is threefold: first, the reader’s parting from the hero; second, the protagonist’s own heavy sense of bidding farewell to his role in history; and third, his adieu from a stubborn people that seemed not to have heard or learned anything from its leader, and would probably pay a heavy price for that. The tone is that of an elegy or lament. The book ends with the following words: “The last portrait of Ben-Gurion, his forehead creased and his eyes gazing into a future that defies all guesswork, teaches us only that the founding father ul-

timately laid down the tools of his trade. His time had expired. The ability to build and destroy, to add and subtract from the edifice whose foundations he had tried to shape to the best of his ability—for better or worse—would belong to future generations” (p. 354).

Aronson examines Ben-Gurion’s leadership closely, beginning his study with the Second World War and ending it around four decades later in the postwar era. He maintains that Ben-Gurion believed the state’s role and nature should be shaped first and foremost by the events of World War II in general, and the Holocaust, in particular. Ben-Gurion learned from the events of the war that the Jewish people needed an independent and sovereign state that did not rely on the help of others for its survival. Aronson concludes that this realization drove Ben-Gurion’s endeavor to attain in any way possible nonconventional weapons that would provide a strategic advantage when Israel faced the Arab states. This would render it independent of the mercy of the superpowers for protection from Arab states’ aggression. In his various studies, Aronson highlights the connection between the Holocaust and the development of Israel’s military option and the security approach formed by Ben-Gurion. In the current book, he reiterates this thesis and integrates it into the portrayal of Ben-Gurion as the preeminent Jewish renaissance leader. The book begins with a war and ends with one. Ben-Gurion’s leadership had evolved during one war and faltered after another. The fundamental difference between the two wars is clear. During the Second World War, the Jewish people were helpless when the world turned its back on them and Nazi Germany implemented the Final Solution. During the Six-Day War the Jewish people proved their strength and with a widespread military action that took only six days managed to overpower the Arab states’ armed forces, expand the state’s borders, return to the “land of the fathers” and unite Jerusalem, the capital of the Jewish people. Exactly at that time, Ben-Gurion’s decline as a renaissance leader began.

This stage of the research is the point at which Aronson’s thesis becomes unclear. The essential question which remains unanswered is why Ben-Gurion’s influence as a leader waned. Was it a result of the end of an era in the history of the Jewish people, or was it due to the fact that he refused to change the fundamental political approach that had shaped his actions as a statesman?

Although the book is based on a variety of primary and secondary sources, the impression is that Aronson chose them first and foremost in order to confirm the the-

sis that he had formulated prior to starting his research. It would be interesting to find out what was left on the floor of the archive and which documents remained unanalyzed. We cannot but wonder why the studies that Aronson chose to incorporate in his own research all support his viewpoint while other studies are ignored. This book is a translation of a Hebrew book which was first published in 1999. Although more than decade has passed since the original publication, Aronson has not updated the text, choosing to disregard the early criticism regarding the book.

In sum we might say that Aronson's goal exceeds the aims of a historical study. According to him, he aspired to leave to the next generation a little taste of the Jewish

renaissance and to describe its limitations and difficulties, for a time when this generation would be willing to learn these things. In other words, according to Aronson, it is possible the current generation is unable to understand the book's message and intellectual value. Yet, one might also wonder whether the thesis or the lessons suggested in the book are substantial enough for the present generation to understand and internalize.

#### Notes

[1]. See, for example, Y. Shapiro, *The Formative Years of the Israeli Labour Party* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1976).

[2]. See, for example, Y. Gorni, *Israeli Labour Movement: Ideological Principles, Social Tendencies and Economic Methods* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1974).

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