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THE ONLY WOMAN IN THE ROOM: GOLDA MEIR AND HER PATH TO POWER

by Pnina Lahav.

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GOLDA MABOVITZ arrived in Milwaukee in the summer of 1906, at the age of eight. Golda, her mother, Bluma, and her sisters, Sheyna and Tzipke, had travelled from Pinsk in what is now Belarus to the Russian border, where they were smuggled across with forged documents, before boarding a train to Antwerp then an overcrowded boat to Quebec. They were eventually reunited with Golda's father, Moshe, a carpenter who had left for America three years earlier. Pnina Lahav writes in her new biography that Bluma and her daughters 'were self-conscious about looking like beggars: unclean, unkempt, and exhausted'. Not long after they arrived in the US, they watched Moshe marching with his fellow trade unionists on Labour Day. Tzipke was terrified by the sight of mounted police: 'It's the Cossacks! The Cossacks are coming!' But Golda was struck by the fact that the 'police on horseback were escorting the marchers instead of dispersing them and trampling them underfoot, as they were doing in Russia.'

Golda Meir (she Hebraised her married name in 1956) often returned to her experience of tsarist Russia: 'the frustration, the consciousness of being different and the profound instinctive belief that if one want-

ed to survive, one had to take effective action about it.' Jews could only live in her birthplace of Kiev if they had a work permit. When she was five, a rumour spread that there was about to be a pogrom. She watched her father try to barricade the entrance to their home, while Sheyna grabbed a kitchen knife and Bluma some boiling water. Nothing happened, but Lahav argues that the incident 'helped construct [Meir's] Jewish identity' and influenced her belief in 'Zionism as the only solution to the Jewish predicament'.

If Meir acquired her Jewish nationalism in Russia, it was America that made her a socialist. At the age of fourteen, she went to live in Denver with Sheyna, who was nine years her elder. Sheyna and her husband had made their home a 'proletarian salon' for Jewish immigrants and regularly held political meetings. At one of them Meir met Morris Myerson, a sign painter who gave her long lists of books to read, and whom she eventually married. She returned to Milwaukee at her father's insistence, but the exposure to new ideas and debates about Zionism, socialism and territorialism had filled her with enthusiasm. She heard about the new kibbutzim where socialist ideals could be lived out, and met

some of the pioneers who came to fund-raise in Milwaukee. The outbreak of the First World War deeply alarmed American Jews with families in Eastern Europe and Meir helped her father organise funds for the People's Relief Committee. One activist noticed her commitment and asked her to join Poalei Zion (Workers of Zion), whose members wanted to build a socialist utopia in Palestine, securing national rights by living and working the land. Its Milwaukee branch, founded in 1906, ran educational programmes, campaigned for socialist candidates in local elections, and sponsored community gatherings. Meir became a teacher in the local folkschule, instructing children in Yiddish about Jewish culture and nationalism, and 'the party soon became her home.' In an effort to rally support for it, Meir defied her father and gave a speech at a local synagogue. She won over the audience – and her father.

Meir began talking seriously about moving to Palestine in the wake of the 1917 Balfour Declaration. After her marriage to Myerson in December that year she went on the road raising money for Poalei Zion, sending letters home to Morris from across the country. While organising a protest against the growing anti-Jewish violence in Poland, she came to a decision: it was time to leave America.' 'Not knowing much about contemporary Palestine,' Lahav writes, 'she may have imagined Zion as an empty land waiting to be redeemed by idealistic Jewish pioneers.' Lahav doesn't mention it, but Meir must have been aware of the work of the Wisconsin historian Frederick Jackson Turner, whose 'frontier thesis' saw settler colonialism as a defining feature of Amer-

ican progress. In May 1921, Meir and Morris travelled from New York to Italy on the USS *Pocahontas*. On a second boat from Brindisi to Egypt, they fell in with some Lithuanian *chaluzim* (pioneers) and abandoned their cabins to join them on deck. It was Meir's first encounter with the 'new Hebrews' – men praised by Zionist leaders for their 'muscle and toughness' (she is reported to have said that she could 'hardly take [her] eyes off of them').

Myerson didn't share his wife's Zionism. 'The idea of Palestine or any other territory for the Jews is, to me, ridiculous,' he had written to her in 1915. 'Racial persecution does not exist because some nations have no territories but because nations exist at all.' But he still went with her to live on Kibbutz Merhavia, just outside Nazareth. Meir enjoyed life on the kibbutz and was chosen as its representative to the Histadrut (the Jewish labour movement). Morris hated it. It was an assault, he complained, on the 'bourgeois way of life'. He also kept falling ill, and after he contracted malaria they decided to leave, first for Tel Aviv and then Jerusalem, where Meir gave birth to a son, Menachem, in 1924 and a daughter, Sarah, two years later. But Meir felt 'suffocation and resentment': she had moved to Palestine 'to become a new Jew, cultivating the land with her toil', in the words of her earlier biographer Francine Klagsbrun in *Lioness: Golda Meir and the Nation of Israel* (2017), but 'had reverted instead to the worst of her mother, the shtetl Jew endeavouring simply to subsist'.

The marriage became even more strained after Meir met David Remez, director of the public works office of the Histadrut,

who helped her get a job at the Women Workers' Council in Tel Aviv. She took the children to live there, leaving Morris in Jerusalem. Meir's affair with Remez lasted for two decades, until his death in 1951; Morris died a few days after Remez, at the age of 57. Golda and Morris never divorced. 'I made him suffer so much,' she told the Italian journalist Oriana Fallaci in 1972. 'He took up a way of life that didn't suit him because it was a kind of life that I couldn't do without.'

In 1938 Meir, by then head of the political department of the Histadrut, attended the Evian Conference, at which country after country refused to accept more Jewish refugees from Nazi Germany. The conference confirmed her belief that Jewish history was defined by tragedy and that 'only a state backed by military power would prevent further calamities.' Survival meant self-reliance at all costs. When she returned to Tel Aviv, Meir stepped up her campaign against British restrictions on Jewish immigration to Palestine. Jews needed a demographic majority because, as she wrote in her memoir *My Life* (1975), 'only here could Jews live as of right, rather than on sufferance, and only here could Jews be masters, not victims, of their fate.' During the 1940s she had various political roles in the Jewish Agency, liaising with British Mandatory officials over the status of Jewish families in Cypriot internment camps, leading a massive fundraising effort among American Jews that paid for arms purchases for the Haganah paramilitary forces (which would become the core of the Israeli army) and secretly meeting King Abdullah of Transjordan on the eve of the 1948 war to

urge restraint. On 14 May 1948, hours before the mandate expired, she was one of the 37 signatories to Israel's Declaration of Independence. The following year, she ran for election to the Knesset as a member of the socialist party Mapai, which won a third of the votes, and was asked to join Ben-Gurion's first cabinet.

Lahav has little to say about the condition of the Palestinians during this period. She does, however, mention Meir's trip to Haifa in May 1948, shortly after it fell to the Haganah. On 9 April, the Zionist Irgun and Lehi militias had captured the Palestinian village of Deir Yassin outside Jerusalem, massacring more than a hundred inhabitants. Ben-Gurion was worried that 'the American public would be appalled by the spectacle of tens of thousands fleeing their homes in panic and despair', fearing the same fate, and sent Meir to Haifa to persuade Arab residents to remain in the city. She arrived at the port in Haifa to the sight of 'children, women, old people, waiting for a way to leave'. She asked the Haganah city commander to take her round the city. Outside a badly damaged house in Wadi Nisnas, they saw 'an old Arab woman . . . carrying bundles of what were probably all her possessions,' according to Klagsbrun. 'When she saw Meir, she burst into tears . . . Meir looked at her and dissolved into tears also. The two women stood there facing each other and weeping.' In a meeting with the Jewish Agency executive, Meir said she 'could not avoid thinking in my mind's eye that surely this must have been the picture in many Jewish towns.'

Despite this, Meir was in no doubt about what should be done by the new Knesset

to decide the fate of the 700,000 refugees created by the Nakba. 'Are we prepared to preserve these villages so that their inhabitants may return,' she said, 'or do we want to erase any record that there had been a village in that place?' She was not, she said, 'one of those extremists . . . who want to do everything that can be done to bring back the Arabs'. By breaking her party's silence on the subject, Meir forced her colleagues' hands. Ben-Gurion and Moshe Sharett, the foreign minister, soon made it clear that refugees would not be allowed to return to their homes.

After independence, Meir held key positions in successive Mapai-dominated governments. Despite her reluctance to return to Russia, she became Israel's minister plenipotentiary to the Soviet Union (its ambassador, essentially). Her appearance at the Moscow Choral Synagogue for High Holiday services in 1948 drew a crowd of fifty thousand. When she returned to Israel she was appointed minister of labour, with responsibility for job creation and employment, the integration of immigrants, and the expansion of infrastructure and housing. In 1955, her then mentor Ben-Gurion urged her to run for mayor of Tel Aviv. At the time, the mayor was elected by the city council and Meir lost narrowly after the religious parties refused to back a woman (when she became prime minister she knew better, agreeing to their demands, such as the definition of Jewish identity by religion alone). In 1956 she became foreign minister, a position she held for close to a decade, under Ben-Gurion and then Levi Eshkol. She proved to be a nimble operator, earning a reputation for diplomatic

intransigence.

Meir's commitment to Jewish interests was unwavering. After Israel's conquest of the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, East Jerusalem, the Sinai Peninsula and the Golan Heights in the Six-Day War of June 1967, she condemned a group of Hebrew writers and intellectuals who had questioned the morality of occupying those territories. 'For me, the greatest morality consists of the Jewish people's right to exist. Without that, there is no morality in the world.' She regularly denied the existence of a Palestinian national identity: 'There was no such thing as Palestinians,' she told the *Sunday Times* journalist Frank Giles in 1969. After the Six-Day War, Arie Lova Eliav, a Knesset member and ally of Meir's, travelled to the newly conquered territories; on his return, he wrote a pamphlet arguing that the West Bank and Gaza Strip should be restored and form the basis of a Palestinian state. Meir was furious. She summoned Eliav to her apartment and demanded that he retract the passages she found most offensive (she had underlined them in red). He refused, and was expelled from her circle.

Such behaviour was characteristic of Meir's leadership style, which didn't brook dissent, and of her resistance to engagement with Palestinians and the Arab world. She became even more determinedly set on this course after she became prime minister in 1969, at the age of 71, after Eshkol's sudden death. When Nahum Goldmann, the president of the World Jewish Congress, arranged to meet Nasser in Cairo in 1970, Meir's government intervened. She took an intense dislike to the progressive lawyer Shulamit Aloni, a young Knesset

member for Mapai, after she described the Israelis as ‘conquerors’ after the 1967 war: ‘How dare you call Jews conquerors? We Jews are always underdogs.’

In the interview with Fallaci (who later emerged as an Islamophobe), Meir spoke of ‘the indifference with which the Arab leaders send their people off to die, because of the low estimate in which they hold human life . . . For us, every single death is a tragedy.’ This line was repeated again and again by Israel’s defenders. A spate of terror attacks during her premiership, from the Black September attack at the Munich Olympics in 1972 to the Ma’alot massacre in 1974, hardened her views. Yasser Arafat of the PLO and George Habash, the head of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, were ‘not men’. ‘I don’t even consider them human beings, and the worst thing you can say of a man is that he’s not a human being.’

Lahav shies away from these aspects of Meir’s ideology, and says little about her preference for military solutions over diplomacy. She focuses instead on the contradictions of Meir’s feminism, and on her domestic political achievements. These included the introduction when she was minister of labour of an eight-hour working day and paid holiday, as well as the establishment of the National Insurance Institute, which provided benefits to the elderly, disabled and unemployed. Much of this legacy has been eroded in recent years by successive Likud governments. Israel now has one of the highest poverty rates in the developed world, with nearly two million – in a country of nine million – living below the poverty line.

MANY PEOPLE were also left behind under Meir, notably the Mizrahi immigrants who arrived from other Middle Eastern countries and North Africa in the 1950s. They were housed in rundown neighbourhoods, faced acute economic and racial discrimination, and resented the fact that immigrants from the Soviet Union (whom Meir championed) lived in relative comfort. Things came to a head in 1971, when the Israeli Black Panthers, a Mizrahi group, burned an effigy of Meir in Jerusalem. She feared unrest of the sort that had recently been seen in the US and agreed to meet the group’s leaders, only to humiliate them by questioning the Mizrahi work ethic. What particularly angered Meir was the charge that she didn’t care about equality: as she later put it, ‘the war on poverty is the war on poverty, and the Panthers did not invent it.’ She eventually set up a commission to investigate the situation and recommend reforms, but her initial response to the young activists was seen as condescension. Much of the Mizrahi community abandoned Mapai for Menachem Begin and the ascendant right, helping to bring Likud to power for the first time in 1977.

The clash with the Black Panthers pointed to a widening generational gap between an elderly prime minister with roots in Russia and the US, and younger brash *sabras* born in Israel. A new crop of politicians, among them Moshe Dayan and Shimon Peres, felt it was time for her to make way. She was often ridiculed in the media and in popular culture, notably in Hanoch Levin’s play *Queen of a Bathtub*, which depicted her as what Lahav calls the ‘emasculator-in-

chief'. She was hostile towards the women's liberation movement ('you mean those crazy women who burn their bras and go around all dishevelled and hate men?').

The reaction against Meir intensified with the outbreak of the Yom Kippur War in October 1973, after Syrian and Egyptian forces launched a surprise attack. Whether Meir was to blame for Israel's intelligence failure and unpreparedness remains a matter of debate. It's clear that the triumph of 1967 bred 'military hubris', and that Meir 'did nothing to question its intoxicating charm'. In the years before the war, Meir rejected the diplomatic overtures of the Egyptian president, Anwar Sadat. But she did keep a close eye on Arab military activities, and asked Henry Kissinger to reassure Syria and Egypt that she had no intention of starting a conflict. She also called for a partial troop mobilisation shortly before the attack, without which the country's losses would probably have been even greater. Nevertheless, Israel's initial difficulty in containing the Egyptian and Syrian assaults and the high number of casualties – more than 2500 Israeli soldiers were killed and 7500 wounded – as well as the delay in securing American military aid, a result of wrangling within the Nixon administration, upended the country's sense of security.

In a society that prized restraint, Meir's weeping during hospital visits with wounded soldiers and their families was a striking sight. But the Israeli media was 'a prisoner to gender stereotypes': many newspapers opted not to carry the images on their front pages, and some pundits felt that Meir was 'too emotional' to carry out her duties. The

generals, by contrast, admired what they described as her 'lucid' and 'determined' performance under immense pressure. The Agranat Commission, established to investigate failings in the build-up to the war, said she 'made the right use of her decisional powers' and 'contributed mightily to the defence of the state'. Despite this, she resigned in April 1974 on the publication of the commission's interim report. Her ruling coalition didn't have a parliamentary majority and she knew there would be a no confidence vote in the Knesset, so she preemptively announced her resignation. She was, Lahav writes, 'bitter and heartbroken' – a victim of misogyny, and scapegoated by a populace unable to accept its own responsibility for the war, having refused to face the political implications of the territorial gains of the 1967 war or to listen to Egyptian demands for a regional settlement. In the last few years of her life, Meir was celebrated overseas, but continued to be criticised at home for her conduct in the war. She was 'crushed' by Labour's loss to Likud in the 1977 election, seeing the result as 'a repudiation of her deepest convictions'. She died from lymphatic cancer a year later.

Today, nearly half a century after Meir's death, Barbra Streisand is producing a TV miniseries based on Klagsbrun's book; *Golda*, a film starring Helen Mirren, will be released in August. Graffiti depicting Meir can be seen on the walls of Israeli cities, and a chain of ice-cream parlours is named after her. Her popularity might be explained by the lack of senior women politicians in Israel – she remains its only female prime minister – and disillusionment with current leaders. At a time of belated hand-

wringing by liberal Zionists, who condemn the continuing erosion of democratic rule as well as the corruption, racism and authoritarian tendencies of the Netanyahu government, Meir is being rehabilitated as a progressive icon. But this is based on a misreading of history. Her Zionism and commitment to Jewish dominance helped pave the way for the current wave of settler ethnonationalists – the likes of Itamar Ben-Gvir, the minister of national security, who leads the far-right Otzma Yehudit (Jewish Power) party, and Bezalel Smotrich, the leader of the Religious Zionist Party and minister of finance. Meir can be placed in the pantheon of women politicians that includes Suella Braverman, Giorgia Meloni and the Religious Zionist MP Orit Strook. Strook lives in the settlement of Hebron (Meir's government established the nearby settler stronghold of Kiryat Arba, where Ben-Gvir lives), and has actively promoted annexation and the expansion of illegal outposts. Meir's socialist ideals have long been abandoned by Israel's leaders, and this chauvinism is her true political legacy. □