

David Ben-Gurion

Introduction

From the 1920s through the 1960s the politics of the Jews of Eretz Yisrael were dominated by one man, David Ben-Gurion. The first prime minister of the State of Israel, Ben-Gurion was dominant as the Jews of Eretz Yisrael made crucial decisions about social, economic, military, religious, and foreign policy.

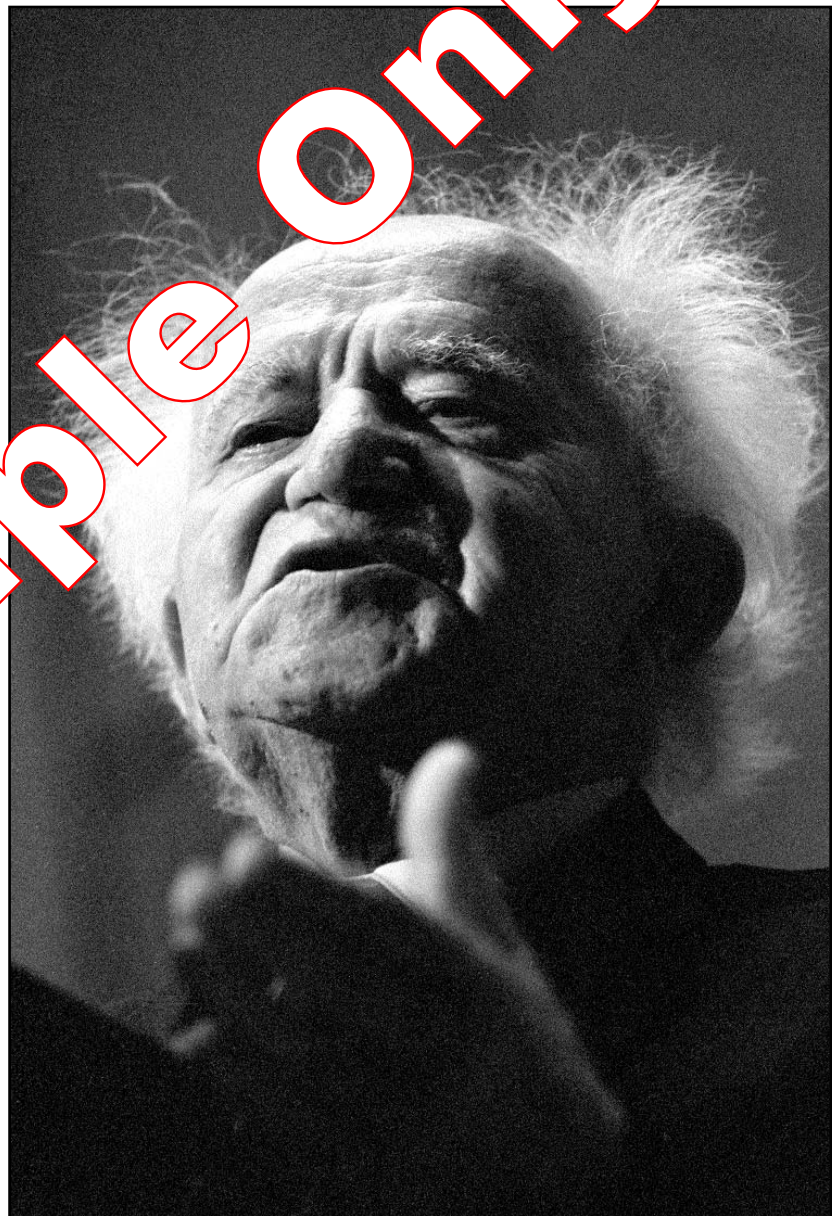
This instant lesson will explore Ben-Gurion's life and the contributions he made to the Jewish people both before and after the creation of the State of Israel.

Early Life

David Gruen was born in 1886 in the small town of Plonsk, in Russia. He received a traditional Jewish education and learned about Zionism from his father, a lawyer who was a member of one of the first Russian Zionist organizations. As a young man Gruen organized his friends into a Zionist organization known as the Ezra Society to practice speaking Hebrew and learn more about Zionist ideas.

Gruen's brand of Zionism was Labor Zionism, a set of ideas that combined Zionism (the idea that the Jews are a nation that should be returned to their homeland in Eretz Yisrael) with socialism (the idea that all people should be socially and economically equal).

In 1903 a series of pogroms against Russian Jews distressed Gruen, who helped organize Jewish self-defense groups to fight back. He decided in 1906, at the age of twenty, that living in Russia was no longer acceptable for someone who believed so strongly in Zionism, and he undertook the arduous two-week journey to Palestine.





In Palestine

THE EARLY DAYS: Soon after arriving in Palestine Gruen settled in the farming community of Petah Tikvah and changed his name to Ben-Gurion—Hebrew for son of a lion cub. Although the farming life was hard and there often wasn't enough food, he was thrilled to be living out his ideals. He wrote his father, "My heart overflowed with happiness, as if I had entered the realm of legend. My dream had become reality."

How do you think the *Yishuv* should have responded to the twin threats of the White Paper and the Nazis? *jot down your thoughts here:*

While Ben-Gurion was hard at work in the fields he was organizing other **עולים** *olim* (immigrants to Palestine) who shared his Labor Zionist ideas. He helped to found a Palestine chapter of the Labor Zionist movement, **Poalei Zion**, in 1907. This organization encouraged the establishment of a Zionist community based on equality and ideals, but unlike some kinds of socialism, it did not advocate the violent overthrow of the government.

WWI: During World War I, Ben-Gurion served with distinction in the Jewish Legion of the British Army, rising to the rank of captain. His service to the British army provided an avenue to influence the Jewish community in Palestine after the war, because for the next three decades Palestine was under the British Mandate, which meant that the British had the power with the local populations, both Jewish and Arab.

In the 1920s Ben-Gurion helped to found and guide two organizations that played important roles in the preparing the **יִשׁוּב** *yishuv* (the Jewish community of Palestine) to become an independent nation. The first was the **הַסְּתַדְרֻת** Histadrut, the general labor federation, which ran its own businesses, provided health care and transportation, and had its own bank and newspaper. The second was the **הַגָּנָה** Haganah, the defense force of the *yishuv*. The Haganah was made up of volunteer "soldiers," mostly from kibbutzim, who protected settlements from attack. Through his leadership of the popular Labor

Zionist movement Ben-Gurion quickly became the most prominent leader of the *yishuv*, and by 1935 he was the chairman of the Jewish Agency, which represented the *yishuv* before world governments. Ben-Gurion argued before the British authorities and others that as the Nazis endangered Jewish life in Europe, a homeland for the Jews in Palestine was needed more than ever. But the British had other priorities—such as the large and increasingly restless Arab population of Palestine.

THE WHITE PAPER: In 1939 the British issued the White Paper, which severely restricted the flow of Jewish immigration to Palestine and promised to cut it off altogether after five years. The White Paper angered and terrified the Jews of the *yishuv*, but when Britain declared war on Germany several years later, the Jews faced a dilemma. The British were threatening to end the Zionist attempt to establish a homeland in Palestine, but the enemies, the Nazis, were threatening to end the Jewish people as a whole.

Ben-Gurion's solution was to combat both enemies simultaneously. "We shall fight the White Paper as if there was no war, and we shall fight the Nazi as if there was no White Paper," he said.

After the war Ben-Gurion visited concentration camp survivors in Europe and became convinced that it was time for the immediate establishment of a Jewish state. He encouraged illegal immigration into Palestine, and—concerned that Israel's Arab neighbors would attack any new Jewish State—helped the *yishuv* purchase heavy weapons from Europe and the United States.

1947: In 1947 he appeared before the United Nations Special Committee on Palestine and argued that while the Jews deserved a homeland in all of Palestine, a state in part of the land was better than no state at all. A few months later this committee advocated the partition (division) of Palestine into two states—one Jewish and one Arab. The United Nations voted in favor of that solution, and on the very day the British forces withdrew from Palestine David Ben-Gurion stood before three dozen of his colleagues in a Tel Aviv art museum and read Israel's Declaration of Independence. The State of Israel was born, with Ben-Gurion as its first Prime Minister.

In Israel

WAR OF INDEPENDENCE: But the infant state was faced with immediate problems. Although within hours Israel was recognized by the United States, its immediate neighbors—Egypt, Syria, Jordan, and Lebanon, plus nearby Iraq—invaded the Jewish State.

After a month of intense fighting the Israelis repelled their enemies and agreed to a cease-fire. As both Prime Minister and Defense Minister, Ben-Gurion played a role in virtually every tactical and military decision.

Ben-Gurion insisted that the various political parties and private armies that had cooperated—and sometimes competed—in the pre-state era be brought together under the government of the State of Israel. His position displeased some Israelis who didn't agree with Ben-Gurion's Labor Zionism. For example, in the fighting soon after Israel's independence, supporters of the Irgun, a "revisionist" Zionist military force, landed a boat filled with arms on the beach at Tel Aviv. Ben-Gurion ordered that the arms on this boat, the *Altalena*, be handed over to the Israeli army (which was essentially the Haganah under state supervision). When the Irgun refused, Ben-Gurion's soldiers opened fire, and several Irgun men died. The "*Altalena* Affair" infuriated Ben-Gurion's opponents, but it was effective in signaling that the State of Israel would have one government and one army.

The *Altalena* Affair is an example of the way Ben-Gurion approached governing the new country: "statism." Statism meant that the Israeli government would take on many functions that were previously the jobs of the *yishuv's* many political parties. The Israeli Defense Force was one, but others included a government school system and government control of many health and welfare functions.

FIRST YEARS OF THE STATE: In Israel's first several years the most pressing issue other than physical security was immigration. Although high rates of immigration led to social and economic upheaval in the new country, Ben-Gurion saw no other choice for a country founded as a haven for

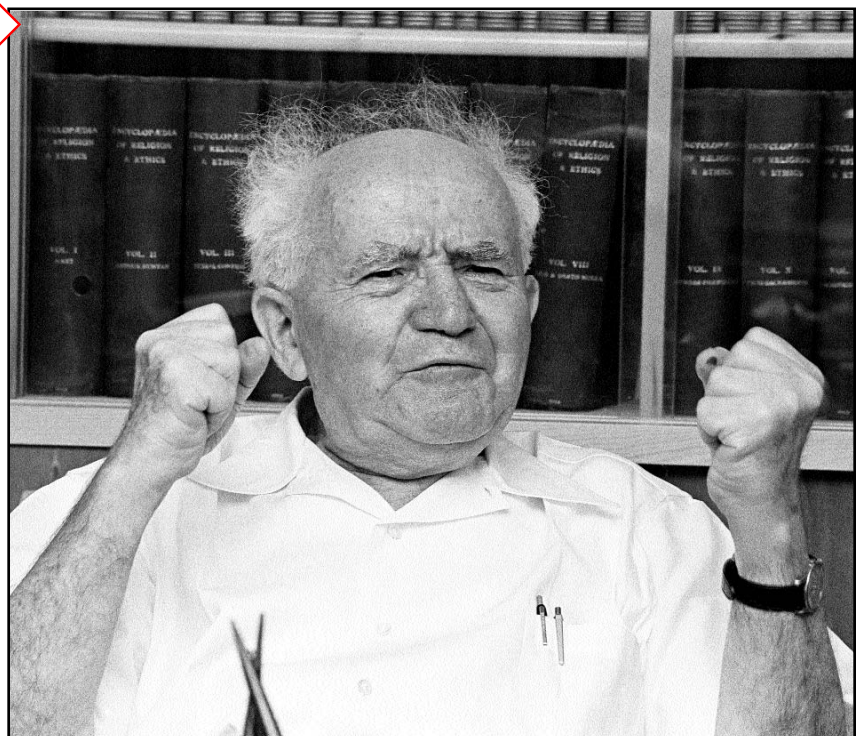
the Jews. These immigrants—including Holocaust survivors and many Jews from Arab lands—needed housing, jobs, and training in Hebrew and the Zionist way of life. Ben-Gurion realized that Israel had limited resources and ordered that food be rationed in this period. Although life was hard for many Israelis at this time, the ingathering of Jews from every corner of the world was inspiring.

Still, Israel needed money. Ben-Gurion pursued two main strategies to boost the state's economy. First, he invited North American Jews to invest in Israel's future by launching Israel Bonds. In 1951 Ben-Gurion flew to the United States to support the sale of Israel Bonds, which raised hundreds of millions of dollars for Israel.

HOLOCAUST REPARATIONS: More controversially, Ben-Gurion negotiated with the government of West Germany to pay roughly a billion dollars worth of goods and services as reparations for the Holocaust. Many Israelis dismissed the reparations as "blood money" but Ben-Gurion felt that it was the least the Germans could do to ensure the Jewish future after their attempt to erase the Jews a decade earlier.

In 1952 Ben-Gurion made another decision that would have long-term repercussions for the State of Israel. Because no party in Israel's Knesset or Parliament won more than half the seats,

Was it right for Israel to accept money from West Germany as reparations for the Holocaust? *Jot down your thoughts here:*



Ben-Gurion's Mapai (Workers of the Land of Israel) Party was forced to enter into a coalition with other parties in order to form a government. Ben-Gurion made a deal with Israel's religious parties to allow them control over religious policy in exchange for support for his government. This arrangement (repeated by every successive prime minister) explains why even today buses don't run in Jerusalem on Shabbat and Orthodox rabbis have control over weddings and conversions, even though Israelis are overwhelmingly secular.

RETIREMENT: After five years of vigorous leadership the 67-year-old prime minister was tired, and he announced his resignation to the shocked nation. The nature of his retirement, however, brilliantly illustrated Ben-Gurion's humility and his devotion to Zionist ideals. Ben-Gurion (known by then as **הזקן** *ha-Zaken*, the Old Man) settled on a kibbutz in the Negev called Sde Boker. In the mornings he worked on the kibbutz like any other member, tending to sheep. At night he read books and worked on his memoirs.

THE SINAI CAMPAIGN: But Israel still needed him. Two years after his retirement Israel's military situation was worsening as Egypt was building up its army in the Sinai Peninsula with assistance from the Soviet Union. Ben-Gurion agreed to return as Prime Minister in 1955, and when war broke out with Egypt he guided the military as it conquered Sinai. Although Israel was later forced to withdraw, Ben-Gurion's leadership helped important waterways open for the country's economy.

After the Sinai Campaign Ben-Gurion remained as Prime Minister through 1963. He returned to Sde Boker, although he remained a member of the Knesset for seven more years. When he died in 1973 Israel was once again embattled—this time in the Yom Kippur War. Nonetheless, the country found time to mourn the man many called “The Father of His Country,” David Ben-Gurion.

Text for Discussion



On July 3, 1950, David Ben-Gurion addressed the Knesset of the not-yet-two-year-old State of Israel. His words expressed his conception of what Zionism is all about. He said:

“The motives at work in the Jewish immigration to the Land of Israel in all generations including our own have been many and varied. Longings for redemption, ancient memories, religious feelings, love of the land, and, above all, distress—economic, political, and spiritual distress. With the foundation of the state, a new factor was added whose strength will continually increase: the power of appeal and attraction embedded in the State of Israel. The pace and scope of the return of the exiles will in all measure depend on our ability to augment this appeal and turn the State of Israel into the center for the realization of the longings of the nation and for the satisfaction of its material and spiritual needs.”

Dream Diary

Imagine that Ben-Gurion woke up the night after giving this speech having had a dream about the future of Israel. Imagine that he wrote about that dream in his diary. Make up your own version of Ben-Gurion's dream of the future of the Land of Israel. What did he see in his dream?