

Of Blessed Memory

Golda

Israel Eldad

Rain—Throughout the entire funeral, just rain. Only as the grave was being filled in did the rain cease: A fact with no symbolic value whatsoever, for soon afterward it began anew. Nor was this a sudden rain nor a downpour, neither stormy nor accompanied by lightning, thunder, or cloudbursts. A simple rain—heavy, continuous, and sad.

Even blessed, timely rains can be sad, and death, even at a goodly age, is sad. All the more when to the rain and the death are added further reasons for sadness, as in the death of a very close friend. It is not necessary to say that this was so at Golda Meir's funeral; she took an entire essence away with her. Special in her belonging: *she was ours*—even as an adversary. No, the well-known Latin phrase, "One says nothing but good things about the dead," will not do. Neither will the Hebrew homily, "After death, holiness should be attributed" (according to the order of the three consecutive Bible portions in Leviticus: *Aharei Mot, Kedoshim, Emor*), and this not because time has distanced and blurred opposition and grudges. Perhaps, perhaps a little because sad reality casts a different light, but even more because of the very essence that cast a touch of sadness even on her fine smile and in the eyes out of which shone all Jewish wisdom and Jewish character and Jewish sadness.

Much about Golda found expression in her very name: GOLDA. Simply, Golda. A classic name out of the names of the Eastern European *Galut*. How many leaders of our times are called thus by their first names—not among their close friends, where one says Shimon, Haim, David, Moshe—but by everyone? But the name Golda was on everyone's lips. In the mouths of the entire people and even to strangers from afar it was Golda. The name Meyerson became Meir—Hebrew, very Hebrew—but the Yiddish name "Golda" remained, and justly so and with a significance. Because not everything which was of the *Galut* was diseased, nor was everything which was expressed in the Yiddish language "Bashevis Singer," which is to say perverted and pathological. One finds everything in Singer's writing, except the faithful portrayal of the culture of East European Jewry which is attributed to it. Maybe Singer got the prize because of the negative character which he imputed to that Jewry. What a strange pairing of prizes was awarded for representing Jews and Israel in a manner acceptable to the non-Jewish world . . . woe to us and woe to truth if his works will serve future generations as a portrayal of that Jewry. It is far too negative a picture (and after all I belong to the extreme negators of the *Galut* and am among those who opposed efforts to rehabilitate the Yiddish language.)

Israel Eldad is an author, editor and lecturer. He was a leader of *Lehi* and editor of its publications, editor of *Chronicles* and co-founder of the Movement for an Integrated Israel, *Hashlema*.

In her name as in her essence Golda represented a tremendous spiritual and psychological element, a healthy embodiment of that same Jewry. Hers was a simplicity possessed of more wisdom than that of all the sophisticated intellectuals so arch in their perplexity. She was simple Judaism in her love as in her hate, and in her instincts as in her "primitive" wisdom, as she herself used to call it. A "primitive" as opposed to people of intellectual intricacy with tightly curled permanent waves of formulations.

Our Sages say that "there is a wealth which can be of disservice to its owner." If this be so, the opposite is also true. There is a poverty which can stand its owner in good stead (and in this case, stood us in good stead as well). For time and again people used to mock Golda's impoverished vocabulary—and not only her political enemies. How many words were there in her dictionary? Perhaps 200, and it is this that was a blessing, to her and to us. No quotes, neither from the Bible nor from Karl Marx and Lenin, nor from Jefferson and Washington, nor from Garibaldi and Churchill. Even though she was Jewish and Hebraic and Zionist and socialist and democratic, she was all these in her innate essence and not according to "as it is said" . . . or "as it is written."

This is a great blessing in the political and spiritual reality in which we live—the Jewish reality in a non-Jewish world, Israeli reality in Eretz Israel, the spiritual reality so complicated as to obscure who and what is a Jew, a confusion and a complexity to which philosophers and authors surrender, or worse, increase the obscurity by their complexity and confusion of language—and in this reality Golda with her blessed simplicity was unique. And that was her special strength. Which was the branch and which the root is immaterial: whether she did not like complicated formulas and camouflage *because* she lacked a talent for intricacies and semantics or never cultivated these skills (something not hard in these encyclopedic days of anthologized wisdom) *because* she disliked camouflage and complexities, it is all the same. Her simplicity was her strength and her blessing. From this stemmed her simplistic answers, "yes" or "no" or "I don't know" (this last as truth, not evasion), unlike her party comrades and government ministers, who used to open every statement with "I would say . . ." (a corruption of both language and syntax which replaced the forgotten: "It seems to me," "I am convinced," or "I think"). These savants would then continue in complicated sentences in which yea and nay, and everything and nothing, would be all mixed in together to confuse others out of their own confusion.

Which politician would have said, for example, as she said repeatedly, "What is the Palestinian people? I too am a Palestinian," and "What do I need all this for?" Just so, in a cadence that held to both a historic truth, insofar as the past was concerned, and Jewish fate as regards the future, without recourse to analysis or to a burrowing in literature, but out of sincerity and instinct and common sense. And should you respond: "but reality," "but for foreign consumption," etc., etc., it is quite clear today that all the attempts at sophisticated subtleties and all the efforts to gloss-over and devise formulas did not help our cause and only advanced the position of our enemies.

And again, in internal affairs: That well-known phrase of hers about the "Black Panthers," when they first organized, which drew so much criticism: She said, "They are not nice boys." First of all, this was true; true at any rate of those who represented them. Secondly, in that expression there was not a trace of hatred or scorn nor evasion of the necessity to aid the poor classes. I have no doubt that she loved them, that she shared their pain and that she was determined—no less than their exploiters, who showered praises on their heads—to help them. For even her socialism—in this context—was not a theoretical

socialism. Everything theoretical was far from her. A socialism that is not a system based on justice and equality, how is that possible? This, too, was something quite basic, an underlying assumption rather than a theory.

It goes without saying that this was also her Judaism or, to be more exact, and so as not to mislead, one should say her Jewishness. Which is to say that she was consciously a daughter of the Jewish people, voluntarily and with love, despite her not being bound to Judaism as precepts nor to a way of life in which she did not grow up. On the other hand, neither was she a fighter in principle against God, the Torah, and religion. In this she differed from another well-known political woman, who actually sacrifices herself so as to desecrate God's name, and is never satisfied until she finds guilt in religion and in religious people.

In our time a large part of the Jewish people seeks Jewish "belongingness" owing to a deep-seated instinct, without knowing how to give scholarly reasoning for this will. These Jews are this way by *virtue* of historic and sociological processes at work in the Diaspora and here, as well as by *lack of virtue* of the religious leadership in renewing *faith* before attempting to renew adherence to the Torah and to mitzvot.

How often one hears the compliment repeated: Golda Meir was a *proud Jew*. Do people not grasp the pathological dimensions inherent in this compliment? For who needs to say that a Frenchman, an Englishman, a Russian, or a Pole is "a proud Frenchman," "a proud Englishman". . .? What is such a thing?

This is clearly the outcome of an "emancipatory" psychological situation, a situation brought into existence by many Kreiskys (how fortunate that he did not grace us with his presence at the funeral—probably so as not to aggravate his PLO chieftains). Yet simple and natural Jewish pride was a Jewish characteristic throughout the generations, until the outbreak of the disease of the emancipation. Golda simply never had this illness. Of course, she had experienced a pogrom in her childhood but together with millions of other Jews she escaped to the land of ideal emancipation and could have prospered there.

But Golda chose not to. Her Zionism came to her simply and her aliya just as simply—in those days of the Third Aliya. It was a Zionist aliya without Ministries of Absorption and Ministries of Disgorgement Back to the Diaspora. She did not come here from a Russia awash with pogroms and revolution but from America. This was the height of pioneering. It was Jewish and Zionist and socialist as well, but mostly it was self-realization. It was a simple and healthy self-expression without her feeling just how sublime it was. Just as afterward in her appearances before the nations—she was so "regal" at her official reception at the White House and so "Jewish" when she stood before the Pope. Without feelings of deriving honor from those greats, with no sense of gratitude to them for their having received her. (What a miserable appearance, by contrast, when others among us were received by the Pope in self-deprecating stances.) Golda never *played* the Queen or a pedigreed daughter of the Jewish people, but that is what she was as she stood before those important and prestigious non-Jews. She had no feelings of inferiority nor was she driven by the thought that she must prove to someone that she was not an "extremist" or a war-monger.

She was most sincere when she repeated again and again how grateful she was for the opportunity to have lived and to have achieved in this period of Zionist realization, a period of Jews living in liberty in their own land. There was a great sincerity in her feelings

of humility *vis-a-vis* these opportunities, and that modesty paralleled the pride and regality.

How does all this reconcile with that other basic fact of her life, her having been a member of a party such as Mapai and one of its leaders? This is a party in which one can find almost everything, but simplicity of monumental proportions was something that had not been commonly found there for quite some time. Moreover, hers was not membership merely, it was an enthusiastic adherence, a genuine partisanship. Ben Gurion grew capable of breaking out of such a framework but not Golda. It was her home, exactly as the Jewish people, Zionism, and socialism were. Just as Israel, Mapai was home. It had problems; it even had cracks. But she was loyal to it.

Granted that all this limited her horizons sometimes to the extent of a natural lack of political generosity. She was no vulture, but a wolf loyal to her lair, to her cubs, to her Zionism, and to her people. As we have said she was an embodiment, an essence rather than a violent force, in both the spiritual and the kinetic sense. This was the house she entered in her youth and in it she remained, and to it she gave the best that was in her, and through it she gave her all to her country and to her people. That best is what we have described above: her common sense, her basic instincts, her unsophisticated loyalty. The practical expression of all these was *Hagshama* (individual self-realization), day by day, in every job and every office, without getting side-tracked to detours, throughout with constant awareness of the Jewish routes, the Jewish scope, and the Zionist goals as she conceived all these from the very beginning. And of all the leaders of Israel—past and present—there was none like her in her sense of Jewish belonging, which is to say, her sense of belonging to the actual Jewish nation, from Moscow to San Francisco, to the Jewish nation that *belongs here*. Precisely because of her distance from religion and even from tradition, she saw no other belonging than that of this people to Eretz Israel. She never spoke of a slippery dual existence.

She remained a Zionist yet did not undergo that "Israelization" that affected so many good people. Despite all the extreme developments she retained her Zionism as a received doctrine—with all the force and all the weaknesses of Mapai Zionism. It had all the meaning of the practical pragmatic realization of achieving what she believed was the achievable maximum in any given situation. If this was indeed the maximum or not is an altogether different question, one which ought not be addressed in individual personal terms but rather in the framework of that political outlook in general. But whoever would claim today—and there are such—that Golda Meir would not have given up as much for peace as others do, does not bestow a compliment upon her. At most, he casts a blot and a mockery on those others. In a similar vein, yet in the other direction, Kissinger grants her a dubious compliment when he says: were it not for Golda, Israel would not have come out of the Yom Kippur War as it did. For the truth is that were it not for Kissinger (and everything which he once represented and Carter continues to stand for), Israel would not have entered the war as it did. It would have entered much better and come out much better. But to enter the war differently would have required leadership of another kind—not the solid loyalty of Golda—an altogether different quality of leadership, which probably is not extant today—and I have little doubt that if such leadership cannot be found, we shall become increasingly hemmed in.

"I have a great sorrow," Golda had recently said repeatedly to interviewers and to those

close to her. Probably her age and her sickness contributed to this sorrow, perhaps also the defeat of her party and the transfer of power to those whom she hated, but doubtless the great sorrow was the sorrow of the Yom Kippur War. But even this, "I have a great sorrow," was said honestly and simply, without the overtones we sometimes catch from others.

The Yom Kippur War was a trauma for her. The thought that perhaps she could have prevented it gave her no respite until the day she died. No, she could not have prevented it. For she was neither a cyclone nor a mischievous breeze. Her solidity was her constancy, her perseverance, and her loyalty. How can we complain that she gave in to Kissinger's dictates if those who are more revolutionary than she cave in in a situation far more favorable than the one in which she found herself?

But, in today's reality with its prospect of a double danger, icebergs closing in from both sides, I fear that we lack a powerful wind that can clear a passage for us in all our straits: a shrinking geography, Israeli demography, Jewish demography, aliya, the social reality, and the economic one. What I fear is not only the absence of a powerful spirit but even the disappearance of the remainders of conserving forces—forces that grow out of stubborn, constant perseverance—that realizing achieving Zionism which Golda expressed with all her being throughout her life.

The small screen shows the funeral again. Rain. Two blocks of figures stand opposite each other on either side of the freshly dug grave. At one side a block of umbrellas, not of euphemisms but actual umbrellas, and across from them a block of soldiers, with no umbrellas, upright in the rain. The Chief of Staff is there too. He has no umbrella. Is he not the one who said: "Who is a good soldier? A Zionist soldier!" Which is to say: Golda was an excellent soldier for she was a Zionist—all her life, even as Prime Minister—even in the rain, in any rain.