

IN EVERY ARGUMENT Levi Eshkol made an effort to see both sides of the coin; it was as a result of this that he was seen as a compromiser, or as a man seized by indecision.

One episode, of central importance and extremely distressing, tested his qualities to the full and led ultimately to a deep and painful schism: the "Lavon Affair."

At this point I should make it clear that I was fond of Eshkol and that I admired him. He had a decisive effect on the course of my life. It was Eshkol who came to Kibbutz Almot in June, 1947, with a letter from David Ben-Gurion instructing me to join the staff of the Hagana. Even before then he had helped me in my Working Youth activities. He entrusted me with a great many duties and every now and then, in times of crisis, he would draw me out in conversation, advising me to consult David Ben-Gurion on personal and professional matters. When he was elected Prime Minister and Minister of Defence, he approached me again and asked me to continue serving as Deputy Minister of Defence, the post which I had held in Ben-Gurion's administration, and naturally I was glad to be working with him again.

It never occurred to me that one day I would be thrown into a position of unprecedented difficulty, and that the episode would end with a total break between us, against my will and contrary to all my expectations and hopes.

Eshkol found it impossible to understand Ben-Gurion's standpoint in the "Lavon Affair." He would ask again and again: "Why is Ben-Gurion taking this business so seriously? What is he really fighting for? A principle? A tactical advantage? And why does Ben-Gurion believe the word of a senior officer rather than that of Pinhas Lavon? After all, it was Ben-Gurion who appointed Lavon Minister of Defence, against the advice of his colleagues."

One day, at the beginning of the "Affair," I was in Eshkol's car, travelling with him from Jerusalem to Tel Aviv.

"What does Ben-Gurion want in the Lavon business?" he asked me.

I replied that I did not believe that Ben-Gurion wanted anything in the Lavon business. He was fighting for a principle, for the truth. Ben-Gurion feared that in our society, even in its highest echelons, there was a tendency to obscure the truth, and that this tendency would bring disaster on our people. If members of the Government were to compromise over the truth, over the fearless and unequivocal pursuit of the truth, then they were liable to recoil from the truth in circumstances where the fate of the nation was hanging in the balance.

"Are you sure," he asked, probing me further, "that the truth is all that he is concerned with?"

"Yes," I replied, simply.

"I see, and do you believe that it is possible to discover the truth and the whole truth?"

"We must try."

"And if you know the truth, do you always tell it? To everyone? To your wife? Your friends? Do you tell other people everything that you have done?"

Eshkol tried to appease Ben-Gurion, but at the same time found himself at odds with him. He remained sceptical and refused to be convinced that this was a fight for the highest motives. He suspected that there was some unintelligible element in all this, some Machiavellian ploy. The relations between him and Ben-Gurion became more and more acrimonious. Ben-Gurion did not like compromise on matters of principle, while Eshkol was not prepared to co-operate in something that looked to him like surrender to Ben-Gurion's caprice.

The criticism levelled at the Prime Minister following the visit to Britain by the Minister Yosef Almogi prompted Eshkol to say that if one or two members of the Government disagreed with his methods, they must draw their own conclusions. Almogi decided to resign, and being his ally as a supporter of Ben-Gurion, I decided to resign as well as a gesture of solidarity. I told Eshkol of my intention to resign, and he invited me to talk it over with him, in the hope of persuading me to stay on. David Ben-Gurion also sent me a message from Sdeh Boker, urging me not to give up my post since "defence takes precedence over everything." But I kept to my decision: I had come to the conclusion that it was impossible to go on working with Eshkol, and at the same time to support Ben-Gurion, who was beginning to oppose him actively.

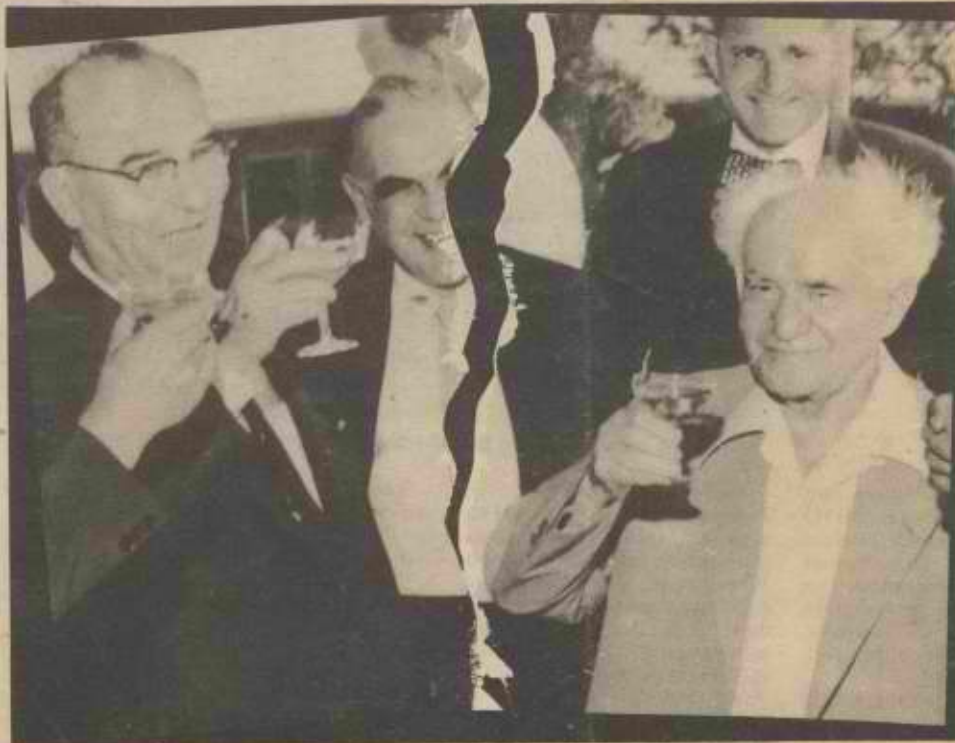
We parted on friendly terms, and at a farewell party held in the Prime Minister's garden, Eshkol paid me some generous compliments.

I was elected secretary of the Rafi movement that we launched in June, 1965. We were obliged to organise ourselves very quickly in

BEN-GURION AND ESHKOL:

How I failed to heal the rift

BY SHIMON PERES
Leader of the Israeli Labour Party



The split widens: Eshkol (left) and Ben-Gurion in happier days

order to compete in the elections scheduled for November of the same year. These were months of back-breaking work. We started out with nothing — no money, no office, no provincial branches. The people who rallied around Rafi were a distinguished group, including Moshe Dayan, Nathan Alterman, S. Yizhar, Yishak Navon, Professor E. D. Bergmann, Teddy Kollek, Yosef Almogi, Gad Yakobi, Matilda Ghuez, and others. We had a common background and close personal links, but we were not accustomed to working together in the context of a political party. And our leader was David Ben-Gurion, whose movements were unpredictable: it was difficult to guess what he would say, where and with how much intensity.

We stood beside Ben-Gurion and naturally we backed up his pronouncements. He began with a ferocious attack on Eshkol, declaring that Eshkol had characteristics unsuited to the office of Prime Minister, and that he lacked the characteristics essential for a Prime Minister... The quarrel intensified. The friendly relations of many years changed into a deep and uncompromising hostility.

Then came one of the most difficult moments of my life: I was obliged to go to Ben-Gurion and tell him that there was no prospect of removing Eshkol, and that we must be content with the appointment of Moshe Dayan to the Ministry of Defence. I knew in advance that Ben-Gurion's reaction would be furious.

I visited him on the Thursday morning, accompanied by a colleague, and described the entire situation in detail.

He erupted like a volcano.

"I thought," he thundered at me, "that you were a statesman and a friend. Now I'm in doubt on both scores. Don't you understand that Eshkol is incapable of being a war leader? Did we not agree that the condition for our participation in the Government was to be the replacement of the Prime Minister?"

I knew that there was no alternative in this argument but to answer him back with equal ferocity and ruthlessness:

"Ben-Gurion, you are fond of saying that if the whole weight of ideological consideration is placed on one side of the scales, and the requirements of defence on the other — the defence side must outweigh the other. Does this rule only govern us, or does it apply to you too? Don't you see what our defence position is? And you know exactly how much our influence in the Knesset is worth."

The volcano subsided as suddenly as it had erupted. Ben-Gurion embraced me and said: "I'm sorry, I have wronged you."

The conversation became calmer, and Ben-Gurion asked me to describe the balance of forces and the latest news from the front. After a while I noticed that a glint had suddenly appeared in his eye, and I realised that I was in for a surprise.

"I understand your thinking and I trust your

logic and your sincerity. But my opinion of Eshkol has not changed. I agree that we should join the Government, on condition that you go to Eshkol and tell him that even after we have joined the Government, we shall have no confidence in his leadership."

After the 1965 elections, I made the principal speech on behalf of Rafi, the first time that I had ever spoken against Levi Eshkol. Eshkol replied with a mixture of annoyance and pleasure: "You're worse than Begin. But your Hebrew is all right."

For two years, between the 1965 elections and the Six-Day War, we met on few occasions. On the eve of the war, on account of the indecisions which Eshkol's Government was showing, my colleagues and I, with David Ben-Gurion at our head, became convinced that the time had come to act decisively and establish a government of national unity, a government that would take pre-emptive action against the danger, that appeared strong, threatening and immediate. We contacted many members of Mapai, of Gahal and Mafdal. Menachem Begin asked me if Ben-Gurion was "ready and able to be Prime Minister." I replied: "Able — yes; ready — I don't know."

I mentioned this conversation to Ben-Gurion, with whom I was in constant touch, almost day and night. Ben-Gurion did not confide in me as to whether he was prepared to serve as Prime Minister again, but he vehemently demanded the replacement of Eshkol.

Through contacts with the various parties, it became clear to me that there was not a majority in favour of Eshkol's removal, and all that could be achieved immediately was the appointment of Moshe Dayan as Minister of Defence. But, in the meantime, Eshkol summoned Dayan and offered him command of the Southern Front, which Moshe was willing to accept. And he sent Avraham Ofer to me, inviting me to join the coalition Government as Minister without Portfolio. I declined, of course, even though Moshe Dayan called me on the telephone that day and said: "Shimon, all your efforts are in vain, you won't achieve anything." I stood firm and insisted that Dayan join the Government as Minister of Defence, as I saw this as an essential pre-condition for the establishment of a government of national unity which would decide on the commencement of war, and bring success in the battle itself.

I shuddered, but I knew that without this bitter pill, confusion and dissension would continue at a time when our soldiers were already preparing to engage the enemy.

I was depressed the whole of that day. In the evening there was a small dinner party at Ben-Gurion's house. Everybody present gave me their enthusiastic support, and Ben-Gurion was the most generous of all. But their compliments did not make my life any easier; the worst was still before me.

Eshkol's secretary called me and asked me to pass on our decision. We arranged a meeting for the following day, Friday morning. I asked Itzhak Navon to accompany me. Eshkol greeted us warmly, as if nothing had happened between us. He offered us tea, putting a lavish portion of sliced lemon in his own cup, as had always been his habit. We told him Rafi's decision (which, of course, he already knew), and Eshkol said he was sure that this decision was the right one. He also welcomed my assurance that "Rafi is prepared to re-unite with Mapai without pre-conditions." At the end of the meeting I asked to be left alone with Eshkol for a *tête-à-tête* conversation.

I began by saying: "I greatly regret that it is my duty to inform you of another message, not an easy or a pleasant one, but it has one merit — it is the naked truth at this time. As you know," I continued, "our belief is that you are not fitted to be Prime Minister, and this view of ours still applies. Of course, once we have joined the Government, we shall co-operate with total loyalty, and all personal opinions and prejudices will be set aside."

As I spoke these words I was blushing and sweating profusely. There was no way of avoiding this painful mission, but at the same time I felt that I was putting enormous pressure on a man who, in spite of all that had happened recently, was still very dear to me.

I believe that Eshkol sensed what I was going through. His reply was calm, even forgiving: "I understand that this is your position — perhaps you will revise it again sometime."

On leaving his room I breathed a sigh of relief. I wondered where I should go next. The natural destination was David Ben-Gurion's house. The old lion was at his home in Keren Kayemet Boulevard, Tel Aviv, lonely and tormented, angry, afraid and as perceptive as ever. I arrived in Keren Kayemet Boulevard, but instead of going to Ben-Gurion's house I went into a small café nearby and called Eshkol's office once again. I asked him for another meeting, as a matter of urgency. A few hours later we met. He looked pleased, but puzzled as well: what did I have to say now?

I began by saying: "This time I am here unofficially, not on behalf of the movement, nor of the party. Tomorrow, or the day after, the guns will start to roar. This is war, and nobody knows how it will end and what the future holds for the people and the State. Is it really necessary for us to go into this war with dissension at the highest level? I believe that the time has come for a reconciliation between David Ben-Gurion and yourself. All that has happened in the past is insignificant compared with what awaits us tomorrow and the day after."

Eshkol stopped me for a moment, puzzled and greatly astonished, and asked: "What do you suggest that I do?"

"Don't ask anyone's advice, get in your car and drive to Keren Kayemet Boulevard, go to Ben-Gurion's house and tell him that we are on the brink of war and that past should be forgotten." And I added: "If I may, I would suggest that you ask Ben-Gurion to leave immediately for the United States, and perhaps France as well, to explain to Johnson and de Gaulle and the Jews of the diaspora what our situation is and what our only possible course of action is."

Eshkol listened patiently, but he was not convinced: "Supposing I go to Ben-Gurion's house and he refuses to see me? What has happened is quite enough."

I replied: "If you're prepared to give it a try, I'll go and see 'The Old Man' first. I'll tell him that you want to meet him face to face, and if Ben-Gurion raises any doubts, we'll abandon the attempt to straighten things out between you, which is so essential at this time."

Eshkol's view of Ben-Gurion was most ambivalent: his admiration for Ben-Gurion never wavered, but it was combined with a deep sense of injury and pain, a feeling that the old man had turned against him for no reason, and treated him quite unfairly.

Eshkol thought for a while and then said: "There is something in your suggestion. Let me think it over and I'll let you know later today."

I left his office in rather better spirits. The prospect of a reconciliation between Ben-Gurion and Eshkol was so important to me that I hoped that with this gesture the circle would be closed, and that grudges of the past forgotten.

Disappointment came quickly. In the evening Eshkol called me from Jerusalem and said: "Shimon, I have given a lot of thought to your suggestion. I understand your motives. But I can't accept it just now. Some other time perhaps."

This episode haunted me for a long time. More than ten years have passed since then, and a great many things have changed. Old wounds have begun to heal, and yet I still painfully regret the fact that the two men, who had once been such close friends, were never to be reconciled, and that they both died while still in a state of deep and bitter feud.