

Remembering Levi Eshkol

The late Premier, the leader 'without charisma,' who died 10 years ago today, grows in stature with the passing of time, writes AVRAHAM AVI-HAI.

WHEN THE histories and definitive biographies are written, Levi Eshkol will probably be credited — first and foremost — for something we all take for granted today.

The legitimate transfer of power from one head of government to another, and even more difficult, the transfer of loyalty of the armed forces from one minister of defence to his successor, are increasingly difficult and rare throughout the world. Even Israel, loudly proclaiming its adherence to democracy, failed in 1953-54. First the armed forces could not find their way to follow Pinhas Lavon, and the state and labour establishment could not put ultimate confidence in Moshe Sharett. But in 1963, the towering if diminutive father-figure and founder stepped out of the Augean stables of party and personal intrigue, rancour, whispers, rumours.

Ben-Gurion left office out of control of some areas of foreign and security policy, of some of the intelligence services, of his party; and on occasion his usual wisdom and far-sightedness yielded to short-tempered impatience. National confidence was shaken. Levi Eshkol restored balance and confidence and healed some of the more gaping wounds.

But leaders fall victim to themselves. The Eshkol who died in 1969 was not the powerful and vibrant optimist and builder who, not without great trepidation, tried to wear Ben-Gurion's shoes as prime minister and minister of defence less than six years earlier.

THOUGH ESHKOL sought peace, he followed carefully and closely Ben-Gurion's policy of enhancing Israel's military power. Experts consider him an excellent minister of defence, who used the early Ben-Gurion-Kennedy breakthrough, when Israel for the first time received hardware directly from the U.S., to create a new and close relationship with President Johnson.

In this, I played a minor role. Eshkol was not blessed with a super-abundant self-confidence as a speaker of English (for that matter as a public speaker in any language), and felt at great disadvantage when dealing with heads of state. Eshkol's assumption of leadership preceded Johnson's by some months. One day I was reading him a "New York Times" vignette on Johnson, selected because it showed their "similarities": pragmatic, men of the land and farm, negotiators, humour... Eshkol interrupted my reading to explain, "That's me!"

Eshkol and Johnson hit it off. It was Eshkol more than anyone, as far as this can be established, who looked Johnson in the eye and replaced



Levi Eshkol (Rubinger)

the duplicitous French connection with the American one. Not that he put his "trust in princes." He pushed Israeli weapon development to a state which is the envy of larger nations.

ANOTHER footnote. Spring, 1967. A full-dress meeting of the High Command. Intelligence predicts that Egypt, bogged down in Yemen, wrapped up in snarls of maintenance problems, "will not be in a position to attack Israel for 5-10 years."

Eshkol: "You know that Egypt can't attack us. I know that Egypt can't attack us. But (talmudically) does Nasser know that Egypt can't attack us? Review and up-date your plans." By June 1967, Moshe Dayan had taken over as Defence Minister, but it was Eshkol who was partner to every decision and especially pushed for the conquest of the Golan Heights.

If Eshkol was so far-sighted, why was he so indecisive in the nerve-stretching weeks of waiting in May and early June 1967? Why his reputation for compromise, for hesitation, for listening to the "last person who spoke to him?" The answer to this is psychological, experiential, diplomatic and political.

Eshkol claimed to have inherited two contradictory traits. His mother embodied gentleness, some erudition and tact. His father, he felt, gave him brusqueness, impatience and the native shrewdness of a Jewish lumber dealer in the hostile environment of the Ukraine.

Experience rounded out his basic "beth midrash" and gymnasium education. His home was folkay and hassidic, his later education was in Vilna, the heartland of Jewish intellectualism.

His experience as a "financier" began as manager of the workers' kitchen — a co-op in Petah Tikva, to where he had walked, shoes strung around his neck, from Jaffa in the winter of 1913-14. As founder of a number of kibbutzim and treasurer of his beloved Degania Bet, he learned of his beloved Degania Bet, he learned to negotiate. "I compromise until I achieve what I originally wanted," he would say with his heart-capturing smile and deprecatory shrug.

ESHKOL had turned his back on the pacificism of his original Hapoel Hazair group which opposed taking sides in World War I. He made his way through British and Turkish lines to join the Palestine regiment of Royal Fusiliers. Both Eshkol and B.G. were corporals, and though Eshkol lacked B.G.'s temperament, depth and historic vision, both ministers of defence with two British stripes seemed to have done better than their star-studded successors.

If the Ministry of Finance cast heavy burdens on Eshkol, in its crushing cash-less days, it was balanced for years by his continuing leadership of the Land Settlement Department of the World Zionist Organization — Jewish Agency. Never one to work from a desk only, he combed the country, sifting the new moshavim and kibbutzim, seeing to the hasty erecting of the immigrant camps, urging the building of the new development towns, of factories, oil exploration, mining. He was a dynamo whose work-day was endless but whose strength, ebbing during the day, would flow back in the afternoon for a second shift, followed by party consultations, speeches, meetings.

But it was a background ill-fitted to the world of diplomacy. Eshkol, seemingly so confident, never more powerful or vigorous when facing down angry farmers or strikers, never so full of great debating points and winning charm as in the rough and tumble of the party or the Knesset, was uncomfortable in the striped-pants circles.

He leaned on a few advisers. When the ugly, lonely days of mid-May to June 5, 1967, fell upon Israel, it was to find the U.S. and the other maritime powers which had guaranteed the 1956 withdrawal, unable or unwilling to help.

In this isolation, Eshkol was not prepared to lead the country to war with a cabinet hung in a 9-to-9 vote. The extra week's hesitation and the ill-famed radio address (into which his over-anxious staff had rushed him

unprepared, unable to read the penned-in corrections), capped a wave of public frustration.

Eshkol had fronted for a group of die-hard Mapai machine politicians. In late May 1967, they delivered the coup de grace, but gracelessly. "Eshkol," they are reported to have said, "is a good defence minister for peacetime." Dayan reaped the harvest of Eshkol's and Zahal's efforts; but the war was brilliantly won.

The troika of Golda-Sapir-Arranne had evolved a policy of aligning and eventually merging with Ahdut Ha'avoda, and in this way blocking the Ben-Gurionist successor generation, then known as "the young ones." Ideologically, the old-line Mapainiks were closer to the more doctrinaire, kibbutz-based Ahdut Ha'avoda, and could fit their younger elements into the slots vacated by the Rafi-Ben-Gurion defection. Eshkol had moved in this direction, to be jettisoned by his friends at the moment of disappointing truth.

The remaining two years in office were marred by ill-health, well-concealed disappointment, a mounting distrust of Golda's personal intentions and ambitions, and yet creativity where he could yet create. Once more, Eshkol successfully pursued the Johnson connection, and brought about greater coordination with the U.S.

WITH THE help of his closest aide, the late Dr. Ya'acov Herzog, he convened a number of conferences of

leading Jewish industrialists and financiers (the Prime Minister's Jerusalem Economic Conferences) and of communal and organizational leaders: The covenant sealed with the Jewish people in the awesome days of "waiting" in 1967 and in the blinding victory and reunification of Jerusalem came to some expression in these conferences, though their follow-up left much to be desired.

Was he a great man? He was a man with wide social vision, deep personal warmth, real Jewish roots, a builder, an organizational leader. Was he a great prime minister? He was a good cabinet leader, a man who could unite and heal wounds — with the Revisionists, by bringing Jabotinsky's remains to Mt. Herzl, with Ahdut Ha'avoda and Mapam, with the Orthodox whose Jewishness he loved and whose legalism and politics he disliked. But he could not heal the wound with Ben-Gurion and Rafi, which led to the decline and fall of Labour.

Nor did he have either the charisma or political know-how to follow a Ben-Gurion. But perhaps no one really could. As time elapses, Eshkol appears larger than those who followed him, perhaps a giant whose true stature was dwarfed by his unique predecessor, and whose true size and strength was whittled away by the smaller men — and women — who used him.

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