

## The Big Jewish Grandmother

Aleksandra Chernyak

The world today is much different than what it was fifty years ago. Women are at the forefront of global affairs. Hillary Clinton, who was once our first lady, served as Secretary of State and it might not be long before we have a woman as President. To be a leader and to lead with compassion means being someone that people can relate to; look up to. It also means being able to sympathize with the people they govern over. There was a special lady, now long gone, that had this ability. She was not my grandmother specifically. But looking back at her wisdom, courage, and character, she was my grandmother. She was the grandmother of every Jewish person in and out of Israel. If she were alive today, Bay Path would welcome her as a champion with open arms. Her name was Golda, Golda Meir. Her life was not filled with opportunities or freedom, at least at the start. She pushed herself up. She found a cause to fight for and she fought for it, not with guns, but with her brain and of course, her heart. Golda Meir is a perfect and clear example of a woman that I admire, a woman who is the model of a leader with compassion. She lived in a time where female leaders in any capacity were few, if they existed at all, and she proved that she was one of them. She was a strong, independent woman who led a nation and led her people even if she was not always in charge.

Just in the description of her book *Golda*, Elinor Burkett called her, “A blend of Emma Goldman and Martin Luther King Jr. in the guise of a cookie-serving grandmother.” She was also known as the “Jewish mother of the Israeli People.” Golda Meir started out as Golda, a little girl living in Pinsk, now Belarus. In 1897, the year she was born, however, it was all part of the Russian Empire. Life was not a picnic in Russia for Jews back then. Between the threat of the

Cossacks, and the lovely pogroms of angry Russians screaming about us killing their savior, it made life very frightening and opportunities were slim, if they existed at all.

At the age of eight she and her family crossed the ocean to America where her father was eagerly waiting for them in Milwaukee. Her elementary school years were difficult but worth it. But when she was ready to enter high school her parents had other ideas, “Now that I had finished elementary school. Spoke English well and without an accent and had developed into what neighbors said was a [fine, upstanding girl], I could work full time and sooner or later—but better sooner—start thinking seriously about getting married, which, she reminded me, was forbidden to women teachers by state law”, wrote Golda Meir in her biography, *My Life*. She wanted to be a teacher and believed and did to her dying day that being a teacher was “the noblest and the most satisfying profession of all” (Meir). This is something that I share with her immensely and while I crave and live in the political matters that affect me I live for the day I can start teaching and help young minds.

It was not only her mother who tried to prevent her education; her father did as well, “It doesn’t pay to be too clever, men don’t like smart girls” he had told her. The fighting with her parents only increased when she, of her own will, started high school. She fought for her right to get an education. At the age of fifteen or sixteen she left home to move in with her sister and brother-in-law to get away from the fighting and the pressure from her parents to discontinue her education.

It was through her sister, way back when they were in Pinsk and again in Denver that she was introduced to Zionism. From there the idea of going to the British Mandate of Palestine, and establishing a Jewish homeland resonated with her. Eventually she returned home and to her

parents, who seemed to have come to accept their daughter's need for education. She became a real Zionist, even joining the Zionist Labor party in Milwaukee. As World War I broke out, the Jewish population, "[Were] convinced that an effective Jewish claim could be made to the Land of Israel after the war only if the Jewish people played a significant and visible military role, as Jews, in the fighting"(Meir). Naturally, being the brave, activist for Israel she was becoming at this point, she tried to volunteer. Of course at that time the idea of a woman in the army was laughable, and she was not accepted.

But her dreams of Palestine and of a Jewish homeland were not crushed. Far from it! She fought for what she wanted from an early age and through one way or another she got herself there. In 1924, three years after marrying Morris Myerson and becoming Golda Myerson, the two of them moved to what will come to be known as the land of milk and honey. The two had two children, Menachem and Sarah who were born in this new land. Even with two children she continued her work with the Women's Labor Council in Tel Aviv. In 1932 her daughter became terribly ill and healthcare in the Promised Land was not up to par. Her daughter's health was deteriorating and the only place where she knew that could help her was America. Despite everything she left, alone, with two children, traveling by train, boat, train, and boat again for two weeks to get to Manhattan and with the chance her daughter would not even survive the journey.

She spent six weeks in America, worrying, praying, but the Beth Israel Hospital in the Lower East Side of Manhattan came through and little Sarah made a full recovery. Sadly though, her work took her away from her children often for a week or even a month at a time. She was a working mother and a political one at that. She tried to balance her job with being a mother; sadly one job overshadowed the other, leaving her little time to truly spend with her children.

After WWII there was great deal of Jewish migration to Palestine on ships from all over Europe. Some ships made it through to Palestine, others were not so fortunate and the people on board were put in a refugee camp on Cyprus controlled by the British, or to others. Golda was now serving as head of the Jewish Agency's Political Department. As part of that job, she visited the camp in 1947 which was filled with Jews, mostly holocaust survivors of all ages. She writes, "—when I went there myself in 1947—and wondering how on earth they managed to reconcile themselves of the fact that not so long ago they were liberating from Nazi camps the very same people whom they now kept penned behind barbed wire on Cyprus only because these people found it impossible to go on living anywhere except Palestine" (Meir). The purpose of her visit was to see the situation as there were approximately 40,000 Jews living in that camp and to see if anything could be done for the children living in that camp. Each year the British allowed exactly 1,500 Jews to enter Palestine; only 750 were from the Cyprus camp. They ruled by the simple policy of "first in first out" meaning the people who had been there the longest had the best chance of getting out first.

Golda began coming up with a proposal to help the babies who were suffering in the camps. She hoped that the British would allow families with small children, as well as orphaned children, to leave the camp. While eventually the British agreed there was another problem that remained. Convincing the camp residents to, potentially, forfeit their spot for another year. When she arrived at the camp she first spoke with a British officer in charge of the camp who, while knowing the issue of small children and their parents appeared unaware that orphaned children were included in that list. He told her he would have to check that orphans were indeed part of the agreement. But he changed his mind quickly after speaking with Golda.

She learned that the officer had received telegram from the chief secretary in Jerusalem which said, “Beware of Mrs. Myerson. She is a formidable person” (Meir) and she was. The actual camp, as Golda describes was depressing. They essentially lived in huts and there was little water for them to drink, let alone bathe. The camp was on the shore but the Jewish refugees were not allowed to swim. The huts were cramped and stuffy and there was nothing growing anywhere on the camp.

As she arrived at the camp she was greeted by children who had paper flowers to give her. She wrote, “I have been given a great many bouquets of flowers since then, but I have never been as moved by any of them as I was by those flowers presented to me...by children who had probably forgotten—if they knew—what real flowers looked like” (Meir). This image was illustrated in the movie *A Woman Called Golda*, in which Ingrid Bergman played Golda for most of the film. This was Bergman’s last film and in the scene, similar to the history, Bergman’s Golda visits the camp and is welcomed by a crowd of children who present her with these paper flowers. A little girl then asks her, “Is this what real flowers look like?” The look that Bergman showed on the screen showed more about the situation than any bit of dialogue. It was a look of sympathy, shock, heartache, and determination all rolled into one.

One of the Palestinian Jews at the camp, a girl named Ayan, who was taken to Cyprus on a captured Haganah ship, later escaped the camp, and became Golda’s daughter-in-law (Meir).

The babies and their parents, and the orphans were allowed to leave the camp and years later one woman would thank Golda in person and bring her to tears and kiss the child that had been able to survive thanks to Golda. Her compassion was a large part of who she was and how she conducted her business. She had a big heart that seemed to beat only for the Jewish people.

She could face dictators and world leaders and their political hooey, but still be a charming and warm person to her children and people in general.

That same year life for Jews in Palestine was much more difficult and frightening than it is today. Although, with the growing threat of a Nuclear Iran who knows. Golda was riding in a car and British soldiers stopped it to search for weapons. Jews were being killed and attacked in violence every day, but they were not allowed to carry guns. Of course they did anyway. There was no other choice. It's a sad fate when your neighbors wish to kill you and even the government out to protect you and help you are in fact just as unhelpful and harmful as those not-so-friendly neighbors.

Golda protested the search to no avail and a gun was found on one of Golda's escorts, a girl serving in the Haganah, a military group that later became the Israeli Defense Force. The British were going to take this girl to jail in an Arab town called Majdal. Golda knew the girl would not be safe there to spend the night and told the British soldier in no uncertain terms that if he wanted to take the girl he had to take her too. It is funny how by then the British knew who Golda was and it seemed they were either really afraid of her, or at the very least intimidated to the point that they knew better than to mess with her. As Golda writes about the encounter "...I don't think [the British soldier] looked forward at all to explaining to his superiors why a member of the Jewish Agency Executive had gone to sleep in Majdal" (Meir). Whether it was her reputation or the fear of his superiors, the soldier changed his mind and they ended up going to a police station in a Jewish town. The girl was released and the British policemen and she ended up escorting Golda to her destination, Tel Aviv.

These stories that I share, or glimpses into her life, show her passion, her stubbornness, and determination to help Jews and the Jewish state. She was a force to be dealt with and no one had managed to take her on other than G-d himself, I think. She was a lioness protecting cubs of all ages.

As the idea of the partition of Palestine came to the heads of the United Nations Israel stood still. The idea was to essentially cut Palestine equally between the Jews and the Arabs, while leaving Jerusalem as a neutral city. Of course, what the British suggested was not a particularly favorable idea to either side. But we, as the Jewish people, wanted a state of our own so bad that we could handle a little set back if only to get our own country. You can say we were desperate. Golda spoke at a press conference where she pleaded with the assembly to not forget Jerusalem for the Jewish people. But aside from that and the general upset about having a state without its most crucial component she said, “A Jewish State in this part of the world, is not only a solution for us. It should be and can be a great aid for everyone in the Middle East” (Meir). She was right too. In the years that followed Israel turned and is turning out new innovations and technologies like there is no tomorrow. Israel has advanced computer technology, the internet, and most importantly, medical technology and the ability to diagnose and treat Breast Cancer and other diseases.

It is amazing that even before the war for independence, even before we had an official Jewish state, Golda Meir was already pleading with the Arabs. Earnestly, if the Arabs had simply accepted the Jewish state, even if they had Jews in their own countries at that point, though not for long, they might have been able to benefit from a friendship with Israel, just as America has.

On November 29<sup>th</sup> 1947 the vote came in. Thirty-three countries including the United States and the Soviet Union (likely the last thing the two nations agreed on) voted in favor of the partition plan. Thirteen, all the Arab states included of course, voted against. Great Britain and ten others obtained. This is rather ironic since the British were the ones to propose the idea in the first place.

David Ben-Gurion, the first prime minister of Israel called Golda the best man in his cabinet and she was. She was stubborn and tough, often against him as well as others, but showed great compassion and hoped and worked for peace with their Arab Neighbors.

But every person has their breaking point; every person has that moment when they have to make a tough decision. In 1969, at the age of 71, Gold became Prime Minister, becoming the third female Prime Minister, after Sri Lanka, and India (Jewish Virtual Library). One of the major, though perhaps less talked about parts of her career as Prime Minister was the Munich massacre.

1972, 11 Israeli athletes were captured and held for ransom in Munich, Germany at the hands of a Palestinian terrorist group, Black September, as the Olympic games begun. Golda was shocked to hear the news. She was shocked, as described in the English-Hebrew documentary *Mossad and PM Golda Meir's Revenge—Operation Wrath of God*, but the potential murder of Jews on German soil was far too reminiscent of the Holocaust for Golda. At that point the Israelis had some experience dealing with terrorists, compared to Germany and so, offered their help in dealing with the stressful situation.

Germany, perhaps in an attempt to prove itself to the world that it was a different Germany refused their help and tried to handle the situation alone, as the Palestinians demanded

the release of prisoners held in Israel. Golda refused to negotiate with terrorists. With the demands not being met, they ordered a helicopter for their hostages and for them. That night the German's attacked, but lost control. The terrorists opened fire and tossed a hand grenade at the helicopter. In the end 11 Israelis lay dead and 3 terrorists alive. Those who remained were taken into custody by the German's though were released when Yassir Arafat's forces hijacked a German plane, two months later, and demanded their release of their terrorist friends (Tablada).

This marked a step backwards, but then again, in the seventies the International Community was not really ready or capable of fighting against terrorists, the hijacking of the German plane proved that. With the blessing of Golda Meir a team was formed whose sole purpose would be to find and eliminate these terrorists. A scene relating to this can be found in, *Sword of Gideon*, 1986, the original from which Stephen Spielberg bases his more inaccurate remake, *Munich*, which was based off a book. In the scene, the main character, Avner, played by Steven Bauer, arrives at the home of the Prime Minister.

Avner arrives with a friend and is greeted by a general as a sweet little old woman enters with a tray of coffee, tea, and assorted fruit. She greets Avner warmly, shaking his hand. As they sit and Golda starts a conversation she slices up an Apple and gives each of the three men a slice, as if the meeting was nothing more than a casual get together between friends. This shows that even in the face of tragedy and horror Golda remained true to who she was and she continued to be the compassionate and loving person that she was, even if she had little sympathy for terrorists. Even if it did not really happen that way in real life it illustrates the kind of woman Golda was, loving and compassionate.

As the scene progresses the actress playing Golda, Colleen Dewhurst, delivers an intense monologue about the importance of having a homeland and how the meaning of it difference from the sabras, or those who were born in Israel, compared to those who immigrated. But then the tone of her voice changes, her face becomes fierce and she stands. She speaks of the Israeli dream to live in peace,

“But they will not let us live in peace. Once again they are killing and terrorizing Jews all over the world, innocent people, even children, in planes, on buses, at schools, in Athens and Zurich, and Tel Aviv, and now in Munich. Meanwhile the rest of the world is playing volleyball and winning medals. So we are alone, as we have always been, since no one will defend us we must defend ourselves. Maybe these terrorists will not let us live in peace, but I promise you that Israel will chop off the hands of those who cut short the lives of our children. This terrorism—all terrorism must be stopped. And this is why you are here. I have decided to strike back. We have been reluctant to change policy, but the guilty must not go unpunished. This is my decision and my responsibility. We will meet force with force” (Sword of Gideon).

A mother cannot bear to lose her children; children should not die before their parents. Taking into account that Golda considered herself the Jewish mother or grandmother to Israelis this was a personal pain. The monologue from *Sword of Gideon* shows that compassion can only get you so far. Compassion is a wonderful thing; it is a great thing that makes us human. But compassion is not always enough. Sometimes, you have to fight. Golda ordered the elimination of the Black September terrorist organization. The mission was carried out and justice was served.

Golda resigned following the war of Yom Kippur in which in 1973 Egypt invaded on one of Jews most important holidays and while the Israelis managed to push back the Egyptians there were lives lost, far too many. The government's lack of foresight and preparation for the event was led with disdain amongst the Israelis and thus Golda resigned

She made great impact when she met with and helped to negotiate a peace between Egypt and Israel in 1977, though sadly she died from cancer before that peace was fully reached and Anwar Sadat, the president of Egypt was assassinated by the Muslim Brotherhood shortly after reaching a peace with Israel. Golda acted differently at the negotiations than other world leaders. While a part was devoted to serious talk it seems, from the video clips available, or in *A Woman Called Golda*, that she and Sadat were somewhat, kind of, sort of, maybe a little on friendly terms. She commented on how he called her an old lady and she congratulated him on being a grandfather, even gave him a gift, possibly to pass to his grandchild. Her dreams of peace showed that in negotiations reaching common ground and coming together as people first and politicians second was a large, if not the main step in peace.

For as long as I can remember I looked up to Golda for her courage to stand up for her beliefs and the guts or chutzpah she had to stand up to her bosses, world leaders, and her enemies. She protected and worked for Israel, she was the ultimate working mother, and world leader. Her compassion was a large aspect of who she was and it showed in her life and career as a Jewish woman and an Israeli. Her hard work and her dreams of peace between Israel and its enemies cannot be forgotten and should be celebrated. She probably would disagree, but she was remarkable woman, a real Iron Lady.

## Works Cited

A Woman Called Golda, Dir. Alan Gibson. Perf. Ingrid Bergman and Judy Davis. Paramount Television, 1982. Film.

Jewish Virtual Library, "Golda Meir (1898-1978)" The American Israeli Cooperative Enterprise. 2013. Web. Mar. 4, 2013

Meir, Golda, "My Life" G.P. Putman's Sons. New York, NY. 1975. Print.

Sword of Gideon, Dir. Michael Anderson. Perf. Steven Bauer and Michael York. CTV Network and HBO, 1986. Film.

Tablada, Arturo, "Mosassad & P.M Golda Meir"s revenge -Mossad -Operation Bayoneta Operation Wrath of God" Online. Hebrew-English Documentary. Youtube. June 30, 2012. Web. Feb. 22, 2013.