

What's wrong with praise when deserved?

In response to "Too much information?" May 28

It is difficult to believe that those who read Prof Yossi Goldstein's review of the book "Shohar Shalom: Hebetim Umabatim al Moshe Sharett" ("A Statesman Assessed: Views and Viewpoints About Moshe Sharett") would not feel that the critic abused his prerogative. Instead of dealing with the contents of the book, its structure and the quality of its 80 chapters, the writer took advantage of the opportunity to lay out his belief of many years that Sharett was "Israel's most failed prime minister."

Goldstein, who penned the biography of Levy Eshkol (the man who, together with his successor Golda Meir, stood at the side of David Ben-Gurion, Moshe Sharett's rival and opposite, when Ben-Gurion decided to fire him from the post of foreign minister in his government) of course has the right as a citizen and a historian to see Sharett as a failed prime minister and give him a negative rating. However, in which way does this conception of the 21 months in which Sharett served as prime minister relate to a book that is supposed to cover 45 years' activity? The work of a person who between 1925 and 1965 spent five years as Berl Katzenelson's right-hand man in editing the daily "Davar" from the day of its inception; of someone who for three years served as right-hand to Chaim Ar-

losoroff who headed the political department of the Jewish Agency, and 15 years as head of the political department himself; who was foreign minister of the new state for eight years from 1948; headed the Am Oved publishing house for four years and was chairman of the Jewish Agency for five years?

Readers could not glean from Goldstein's article a single fact about the substance of the book, or an appreciation of the comments of the dozens of writers of all views (from Abba Eban, Uri Avneri and Natan Alterman to David Ben-Gurion, Uri Kesari, Herzl Rosenblum, Zalman Shazar and Eliyahu Sasson). Nor could they glean anything about its division into five sections (Aspects and views; Dismissal from the government; In the eyes of seven historians; "A personal diary"; Six newspaper interviews). The only thing they learned was that this is a book of praise "in which scholars and other notable figures examine and laud Sharett's activity as a man of peace."

Readers of the book will see with their own eyes that, together with the praise, there are frank words of criticism about Sharett, and first and foremost Ben-Gurion's "J'Accuse" which spells out all Sharett's sins. But one can ask, what is wrong with praise so long as it is justified? Is it mere coincidence that people considered Sharett a paragon of integrity, decency, common sense and peace-seeking, and that they praised him for all these attributes?

I state - in direct contrast to what Prof. Goldstein wrote - that no other prime minister received

such a concentrated and diversified collection of appreciations of his personality and life's work as that appearing in "A Statesman Assessed". Goldstein is angry about "the lack of proportion" in the number of publications about Sharett, saying that "the fact that the writings and sayings of other Israeli prime ministers - including David Ben-Gurion, the most important and influential of all - have not been published so extensively creates a certain feeling of disproportion. Levi Eshkol, Golda Meir and even Menachem Begin - all prime ministers of considerable importance - have not had even a fraction of their written and spoken words issued in print."

I wish to state without hesitation that Goldstein is mistaken when he attaches the blame for "disproportion" to the "laxity" of the heads of other commemorative societies for other prime ministers. The naked and cruel truth is that the heritage of Eshkol's and Meir's "writings and sayings" is close to nil, so the heads of the societies cannot be blamed.

This cannot be said of Sharett's writings and sayings, even those from 1916 which are still as pertinent as ever. Ben-Gurion had admirers because he was a despot. Sharett was loved because he was an amiable and mild-mannered person who did not cast fear around him. Sharett was not a leader of precepts. He was a leader who would convince people. But the yearning for a charismatic leader, who knew everything and was omnipotent, who would consult no one but himself, was embedded in the hearts of the ma-

jority in Israel, as can be seen in the Biblical Yotam's parable.

It is therefore not surprising that when Sharett, the believer in level-headedness, took over from the impulsive Ben-Gurion, who was always in a rush to make decisions and tried in vain to persuade his party colleagues to anoint Eshkol instead of Sharett, a number of people, led by the frustrated Ben-Gurion himself, began harassing the moderate prime minister. As Goldstein puts it: "Ben-Gurion, who did not want Sharett as his successor and did not believe he had the power or abilities needed by a prime minister, created an unofficial locus of political power in his place of retirement in Sde Boker that existed alongside the legal government and tried to take independent initiatives."

Does Goldstein hear what he is saying? What does he mean by "independent initiatives" if not the Lavon Affair in Egypt, which, as anyone with eyes can see, was planned by then chief of staff Moshe Dayan? And it is doubtful whether his mentor in Sde Boker was not involved as well. Indeed, we are told by Goldstein that the military leadership (namely, the champion plotter, Dayan) had direct ties to Ben-Gurion, and under his guidance a parallel ruling power was emerging, complete with an agenda of its own.

How therefore does a historian, after all this, dare to speak about Sharett's failure? It was not Sharett's failure but rather the inevitable victory of his more powerful adversaries who, from the outset, tried to thwart his mod-

erate policies and opposition to preemptive wars. Sharett did not fail; he was undermined. Israel, contrary to Sharett's level-headed and fundamental objection to preemptive warfare, to say nothing of a war aimed at territorial acquisitions, went to war precisely for these two-fold objectives in October 1956, a short while after Sharett's dismissal. The war of 1956, Ben-Gurion's first war of choice, led to Eshkol's war of 1967, which led to Meir's war of 1973. The alternative that had been personified by Sharett - the prime minister whose name was not tied to any war - could not be put into practice. Meanwhile, the military cemeteries continue to increase in size.

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Letters to the Editor