

Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Dove

Haim Chertok

I was of three minds,

Like a tree

In which there are three blackbirds.¹

Wallace Stevens

Valedictorian

In Zionist historiography, several photographs taken on May 14, 1948 at the old Tel Aviv Museum of Art have become iconic. In each may be discerned the drawn features--much wearied by heavy responsibility, lack of sleep, and the burden of transatlantic travel - of the same visage that since 1987 has adorned the twenty shekel bill, the most widely circulated banknote in the land. Although his name and



dates - 1894 and 1965 - may be distinguished in squinty crimson

print on a side panel of the note, it will soon be obvious to anyone who devotes an hour or so to surveying cab drivers, waitresses, or grade school teachers that exceedingly few Israelis are able to identify him at a glance. When I queried a university class of twenty-three, only eight students could name the man who had served as Israel's second prime minister.²



In his time, however, **Moshe Sharett** was anything but just another Zionist worthy. Among the foremost Zionist figures of his era, he stood third to none. For more than two decades he and **David Ben-Gurion**, each possessed of unique qualities and abilities that complemented the other, worked in prickly tandem. Never intimates, not even friends, nevertheless this twosome may be likened to football players **Doc Blanchard** and **Glenn**

Davis, another Mr. Inside and Mr. Outside that flourished in the '40s. Several years ago **Moshe Sharett's** older son **Ya'akov Sharett** conjectured in these pages that the unwarrantable erasure of his father from public memory might best be comprehended as an accident of timing: he *"belongs to the pre-1967 war era, a war considered by many as the watershed of Israel's political course..."*³

Expiring at seventy, on the farther shore of that historical divide, **Moshe Sharett** had never manifested any symptom of coveting prestige or vulgar ambition. His star had inexorably risen on the wings of abnegation, intellectual brilliance, and total dedication to the Zionist cause.

Fluent in eight languages (almost uniquely among Ashkenazi Zionist leaders, including Arabic), polyglot **Sharett** in 1913 had glittered as the reigning valedictorian of the maiden graduating class at the Herzliah Gymnasium, Tel Aviv's elite secondary school. He was a particularly fine Hebrew stylist. Indeed, the rejuvenation of the language became one of his truest passions.

Based upon a three-letter, ancient Hebrew cognate, he delighted in formulating neologisms appropriate to a modern, dynamic society. Over the course of a lifetime he created dozens of new words, many of them in use to this day. Typical of his creative extrapolations are *yitsug* (representation) and *lavyan* (satellite).

Irrepressible, he did not even hesitate to red-pencil and return-to-sender letters written to him by his children. 4

Indeed, words were both **Sharett's** passion and his weakness.

Like a poet, the perpetual valedictorian was inebriated by them, at times exasperating **Ben-Gurion** or **Moshe**



Dayan with what they considered pedantry or rambling. At other times, his critics have thought him guilty of mistaking words for deeds. For homo politicus, that might justly be considered a grievous fault.

Junior Partner

The following is excerpted from a letter by **Moshe Sharett** dated February 12, 1914:

We have forgotten that we have not come to an empty land to inherit it, but we have come to conquer a country from a people inhabiting it, that governs it by virtue of its language and savage culture... Recently there has been appearing in our newspapers the clarification about “the mutual misunderstanding” between us and the Arabs, about “common interests” [and] about “the possibility of unity and peace between the two fraternal peoples.”... [But] we must not allow ourselves to be deluded by such illusive hopes ... for if we cease to look upon our land, the Land of Israel as ours alone and we allow a partner into our estate, all content and meaning will be lost to our enterprise. ⁵

The sentiments might have been voiced by **Ben-Gurion**. Although the two men often diverged on matters of tactics and style, up until statehood they shared a common vision and were in agreement on all fundamentals. Both utterly devoted to the cause of Zionism, in time they would diverge on what they thought served it best. It was **Moshe Sharett** who, particularly after 1948, would shift his priorities whereas **Ben-Gurion** remained wedded to whichever fresh tack promised territorial expansion. After the assassination of **Haim Arlosorov** in 1933, without opposition his deputy **Moshe Sharett** replaced him as director of the Jewish Agency’s political department, in the process becoming the third partner in the ruling Zionist troika. What with the moderate **Haim Weizmann**, president of the WZO, frequently at odds with the more precipitate **Ben-Gurion**, **Moshe Sharett**’s natural role was to mediate between the period’s two most pivotal Zionist figures — and between Diaspora and the Yishuv - a delicate task for even a diplomat as agile as **Moshe Sharett**. His son recalls a crisis that gave rise to a permanent rift:

At one point during 1943, when **Sharett** clearly sided with **Weizmann**, **Ben-Gurion** exploded and, treating **Sharett** as a defector from his camp, stopped talking to him for several weeks. Subsequently, they patched up this rift, but it seems that ever after they ceased to feel comfortable and spontaneous with each other. In later years, when once referring to that episode, **Sharett** said: "I compare our relationship to a priceless crystal. It suffered a crack. It remained usable as before, but the crack, an irreparable one, remained." As far as **Ben-Gurion** was concerned, he no longer seemed to view his relationship with **Sharett** as a real cooperation but rather as a tentative "coalition."⁶

From 1933 until 1948, **Moshe Sharett** took complete charge of the Political Department of the Jewish Agency, serving, in effect, as shadow foreign minister of the embryonic state. When, like a multi-colored Oz emerging out of the shadow of trusteeship, the State of Israel itself shone forth, **Moshe Sharett** became its first foreign minister, the role for which he had long been groomed. Finally, in 1954 the junior partner ascended to the top rung of the ladder, succeeding **Ben-Gurion** to become Israel's second prime minister.

For more than two decades, **Moshe Sharett**, barring only **Ben-Gurion** himself, had been preeminent among Zionist leaders of the Yishuv which depended upon their partnership. Yet the crystal had been cracked; their coalition had become a convenience. Even in retirement, the hedgehog could not refrain from pursuing the one thing he knew best - dominion.

Non-Euclidian Geometer

How may one account for the so-called "weakness" or temperamental indisposition for the polemical conflict or infighting in **Moshe Sharett's** character? A theory spun by his elder son **Ya'akov** centers upon the relationship between his father and his grandfather, **Ya'acov Shertok**, who died in 1913 when his son **Moshe** was only nineteen. The two had been extraordinarily close. **Ya'akov Sharett** hypothesizes that because his father never properly rebelled against his own father, his psychological development got short-circuited. Consequently, he argues, all of his life **Moshe Sharett** gravitated toward surrogate father

figures whom he later found much difficulty in opposing forcibly.⁷ Of these, **Ben-Gurion** was neither the first nor the most intimate, but circumstance decreed his preeminence.

Certainly there were occasions when something hindered **Moshe Sharett** from reacting as robustly as one might expect. An instructive example occurred during World War I. Prior to the war **Moshe Sharett** had been studying law in what was then still Constantinople with an eye toward representing the Jewish community in Palestine vis-à-vis the Ottoman establishment. As an Ottoman subject, with the outbreak of hostilities, he could not but enlist in the Ottoman army. As it grew increasingly plain that the British would be the power on the ground in the post-war period, **Eliyahu Golomb** and **Dov Hoz**, both of them former **Moshe Sharett** classmates and later brothers-in-law, repeatedly urged him to desert the Turkish ranks for the good of the Zionist cause. Although appreciating the correctness of their analysis, **Moshe Sharett** was effectively immobilized by indecision. In later years, he much regretted his inertia.⁸

In any event, **Moshe Sharett's** indecisiveness never disarmed his critical faculties. Characteristically counseling moderation or prudence within the inner circles of Mapai or government, at many junctures **Moshe Sharett** spoke out to blunt and block **Ben-Gurion's** more impetuous overtures.

As early as 1920, in his analysis of the Arab riots, **Moshe Sharett** *“severely criticized the Zionist and Yishuv leaders for failing to do more to improve relations between the Jewish and Arab communities. Such a sound position could only have been attained if leaders had tried ‘to reach a compromise on the basis of respect for our neighbors in the country and region, and to acquire [the Arabs’] recognition of, and consent to, the basic political principles involved in the establishment of our national home.’”*⁹

A year later, **Moshe Sharett** went a step further, granting that far from being merely instigated by the machinations of corrupt, often absentee landlords, the Arab rioters *“constituted an authentic manifestation of Arab nationalist fervor”* that was fully supported by the Arab masses. His prescription for the Yishuv was to scuttle doctrinaire, unrealizable

efforts to achieve cooperation between Jewish and Arab workers in favor of “...*encouraging Jewish immigration, increasing land purchase, establishing more settlements, and, last but not least, improving their shaky relations with the British government and Arab leaders.*”¹⁰

We all recall that half-a-century later **Golda Meir** was still famously denying the very existence of an indigenous Arab nationalist movement.



Now, forty years further down the road, neither intermittently bloody conflict nor fitful rounds of talk seems to have moved us many inches closer to squaring our vicious circle: how might we obtain the genuine consent of a pervasive nationalist movement headed by entrenched Palestinian leadership to the basic premises of Zionism?

If indeed no viable solution seems possible, **Moshe Sharett**, who fully appreciated the nature of the conundrum, could scarcely be faulted for failing to propose one. During his relatively brief tenure at the helm of state, whenever he was confronted by Arab provocations and intense public pressure, **Moshe Sharett** reluctantly approved retaliatory raids. On his watch, there were several dozen. Nevertheless, he was temperamentally on the side of impossible hope and, like a mantra, could generally be relied upon to counsel moderation. Many have viewed this as a symptom of weakness, but could it not just as reasonably be interpreted as a source of strength? Perhaps **Moshe Sharett** intuited that, in ways yet unknown, the circle could ultimately be squared through the application of new, non-Euclidean paradigms of thought.

Ben-Gurion, on the other hand, conceiving the means one employs to be instrumentally subservient to the greater end, perceived that irreconcilable nationalist interests would always entangle Jews and Arabs who sought compromise in logical and psychological inconsistency. It was futility, he thought, to even try. In 1919, he declared: “...*not everybody sees that there is no solution to this question. No solution! There is a gulf, and nothing can*

bridge it. We, as a nation, want this country to be ours, the Arabs, as a nation, want the country to be theirs.”¹¹

Isaiah Berlin could have borne in mind multifaceted **Moshe Sharett** and single-minded **Ben-Gurion** when he famously borrowed a fragment from Archilochus: “*The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing.*” However neither **Gandhi** the hedgehog nor **Churchill** the fox much impressed the Old Man. Of all twentieth century public figures, **Ben-Gurion** reserved his highest admiration for **Vladimir Lenin**.¹²

Jefferson Manqué

In the most celebrated of those aforesaid photographs depicting the proclamation of Israel’s Declaration of Independence, five members of the provisional Zionist government flank **David Ben-Gurion** to his left and five others sit to his right. Standing beneath



the familiar, prophetic poster of **Theodore Herzl**, the leader of the Jewish people intones his text. **Moshe Sharett** is seated second on the speaker’s left. It was a lucky slot because in a direct line with **Ben-Gurion**, a microphone totally occludes from view **Hayyim Moshe Shapira**, leader of the National Religious Party.

The second photo—were it a late eighteenth century painting of the French historical



school, it might grandiosely be entitled “Ben-Gurion Inscribes His Name on the Proclamation”—portrays **Ben-Gurion** and **Moshe Sharett** huddled together and peering intently at the reborn state’s founding document while an anonymous functionary looks on benignly. If one did not know better,

Moshe Sharett might be a banker indicating the proper place for his client to affix his signature on a curling document. Or, with a finer irony, the three pairs of hooded eyes could easily be imagined seeking the proper place to continue with a public reading from a Sefer Torah that had just been unrolled.

Not a single one of the twenty-three students mentioned at the start had the foggiest notion what else appears on the twenty shekel note. One side contains a portion of a speech that **Moshe Sharett** delivered at the UN in May 1949 elucidating Israel's historical and philosophical position in the family of nations. On the other side are illegible excerpts from a speech **Moshe Sharett** gave upon returning from a trip to visit members of the Jewish Brigade in Italy. In print so tiny that one is unable to distinguish it from the background design, purportedly **Sharett's** books are listed.



Had matters taken a different course, the NIS20 would surely have displayed a portion of Israel's Proclamation of Independence. Two evenings earlier **Moshe Sharett**, clearly basing himself upon the classical rhetoric and structure of the **Jefferson**-authored American Declaration of Independence, had proudly fashioned the original version of Israel's founding document in the graceful, ornamented Hebrew that he took justifiable pride in flaunting. As was his wont, he dictated his Proclamation to his daughter.

Too abstract, circumlocutory, and rhetorical for his taste, **Ben-Gurion** spurned the stylish **Sharett** version, which is still extant. Instead he demanded the creation of a revision committee, which he himself chaired, to condense and simplify it. In a pique, **Moshe Sharett** disdained even to participate. Although based upon the **Sharett**-authored original, the Jeffersonian role of creator of Israel's founding document was assigned to **Ben-Gurion**. On the eve of the general session of the provisional government, **Moshe Sharett** privately accused him of "*assassinating his Proclamation.*"¹³

On May 14, 1948, the momentous day on which **Herzl's** prophesy reached fulfillment, **Ben-Gurion** was sixty-two, **Sharett** only fifty-four. However the eight years that separated the broad-browed, stocky figure whose balding forehead is framed by wispy, unkempt patches of mane from the thinner one with the thick, black, wiry hair and the Chaplinesque mustache could easily have been eighteen. Nevertheless **Ben-Gurion**, vigorous into his eighties, would outlive his younger colleague by almost a decade.

Equilibrist

For many years a canard has been in general circulation. It has been disseminated by **Ben-Gurion** hagiographers and, buttressed by **Moshe Sharett's** equivocal performance as prime minister in the following decade, is still subscribed to by many. Yet, as **Sharett's** biographer avers,

The reports that **Moshe Shertok** [in his final meeting with Secretary of State **Marshall** before flying back to Palestine] wavered at a time he should have held firm originated with **Ben-Gurion's** camp, and are based on unverifiable statements by people who have long since died.¹⁴

Upon returning to Tel Aviv to report to the "People's Administration," the thirteen-member provisional cabinet that, after much urging by **Moshe Sharett**, had been established by the Jewish Agency, he is rumored to have waffled over endorsing an immediate declaration of Jewish statehood. Only a late night meeting with **Ben-Gurion** is supposed to have stiffened his faltering resolve. Inasmuch as the vote for the immediate proclamation of statehood passed by a vote of only six to four, two members of the provisional cabinet being trapped in besieged Jerusalem, a third still in New York, **Moshe Sharett's** assent was essential.

However, as reported in these pages two years ago, at a press conference held on May 12th upon his arrival in Palestine **Moshe Sharett** asserted "*...it was necessary to declare the establishment of the state and reject the proposal made by the American State Department.*" As for the rumored decisive private meeting between **Moshe Sharett** and **Ben-Gurion**,

Source material for the period yields no confirmation of this theory. **Ben-Gurion** does not mention his meeting with **Moshe Sharett** in his diary. In a letter to **Pinchas Neeman**, he [**Ben-Gurion**] writes, “The ‘shocking rumors, etc.’ about **Shertok**’s ‘painful mission’ are a stupid lie. Like the rest of us, **Shertok** is in favor of establishing the State of Israel immediately.”¹⁵

Let us recall that **Moshe Sharett** was shocked when on March 19th American UN Ambassador **Warren Austin** formally reneged upon American support for the partition of Palestine. Suddenly the United States favored a new trusteeship for Palestine, one administered for an indeterminate period by Great Britain. **Moshe Sharett** viewed this as a stab in the back administered by a mercurial President and a perfidious Secretary of State, one that aimed to undo the much-celebrated General Assembly resolution of November 29th. A few days later, in a fund-raising speech in Indianapolis, a defiant **Moshe Sharett** delivered a riposte worthy of **Ben-Gurion**: “*The Jews control their own fate! The Jewish State will be established because it is the wish of the Jewish people and because it is the only possible outcome of historical developments that cannot be stopped.*”¹⁶ What, one wonders, did **Ben-Gurion** have to persuade **Moshe Sharett** about in that hypothetical, late night conclave two months later?

In the end, however, none of the foregoing absolutely rules out such a tête-à-tête between the two in the wee hours of May 13th, but there seems a far more plausible explanation for **Moshe Sharett** on the following day, raising the possibility that, in order avoid the impression that they had acted in disregard of the UN resolution, their next step might be to find a formula to declare the provincial government so it would be clear that the independent state existed without explicitly declaring that a sovereign state existed?¹⁷ If indeed such a late at night meeting had occurred with the purpose of stiffening **Sharett**’s resolve to support the immediate declaration of statehood, wherefore such a trial balloon? It simply wouldn’t have been consistent keeping his word to **Ben-Gurion**, and one thing we may be certain of is that **Moshe Sharett** was scrupulous in keeping his word.

Much more probable is that at that so very critical juncture in the People's Administration's deliberations, **Ben-Gurion** sensed in his adroit colleague less vacillation per se than, fortified by a penchant for linguistic legerdemain, an irruption of his irrepressible "weakness" for seeking compromise formulae. Perhaps justifiably exasperated, **Ben-Gurion** famously exclaimed, "*Time is running out,*" his bland evocation of Brutus's rebuke to Cassius: "There is a tide in the affairs of men,/ Which taken at the flood..."¹⁸

Zionism - the establishment of a viable Jewish state - was the vital current, the voyage, and the destination of both of these men's lives. The eyes and ears of not only the entire Jewish people, but also of the Arabs, the State Department, Whitehall, the Kremlin, Lake Success, and indeed of much of the greater world were focused on the marathon deliberations of this provisional Jewish government. Quite literally, the midnight hour had arrived. Indeed, were this opportunity not grasped mightily, were statehood to linger in the wings weeks, days, or even moments longer, might it not yet slip through their fingers? At issue for **Ben-Gurion** was not **Moshe Sharett's** resolve but his tactics: the Old Man's cri-de-coeur was a plea to his wordsmith colleague to rein in his verbal wizardry. This was a time for directness and clarity.

What **Ben-Gurion's** outburst most probably short-circuited was the vital exposition of **Moshe Sharett's** argument. His strategy was not to raise a fresh impediment to declaring independence at once. On the contrary, it was to demonstrate to those yet susceptible to persuasion that since the essence of an independent state resided precisely in its assertion of sovereignty, no face-saving formula could possibly be devised. Hence, whatever quandaries it entailed, the only logical and sensible course would be the immediate proclamation of sovereignty.

After a general furor, by common consent the topic shifted to the military situation and the delivery of general evaluations by **Yigael Yadin** and **Yisrael Galili**, They were by no means encouraging. In fact they affirmed that a three-month cease-fire, urged by the moderates and playing into the hands of the American proposal, could be highly beneficial to the beleaguered Yishuv.

Had **Sharett** been of a mind, he could easily have exploited **Yadin's** and **Galili's** conclusions in support of his original feeler. In fact, he did the opposite. Asked again about the likely American reaction, "he again assured them that according to his information, the USA would not react strongly [i.e., negatively] to the proclamation of the state."¹⁹ It seems highly probable that, as the midnight hour approached, **Moshe Sharett** declared himself unequivocally as he intended from the start: for the immediate declaration of statehood for the Jewish people.

Servant

In 1949, shortly after the election of the first government of the new Jewish state, **Moshe Shertok** Hebraicized his name to **Moshe Sharett**. He did it with the flair of a much-practiced mohel. Deftly he snipped the final Hebrew letter—the *koph*--from **Shertok**, a Russian Jewish surname which some have linked etymologically to *chort*, Russian for "devil." **Sharett's** witty whittling produced the Hebrew word for "servant," i.e., a servant of the people. What bears particular emphasis is that for **Sharett** this was no droll conceit. From his schooldays **Moshe Sharett**, together with a small band of classmates who became intimate, lifelong comrades, pledged himself to abjure self-interest the better to serve the Zionist cause with all his heart and all his soul and all his considerable intellectual power. This exemplary servant of the Jewish people never deviated from that chosen path.

After getting finessed out of the Cabinet in 1956, **Sharett** served again for a time as foreign minister, continued serving as a member of the Knesset until his death in 1965, and from 1961 also assumed the reins of the Jewish Agency. "**Sharett**" was **Moshe Shertok's** precise rejoinder to Juliet's plaintive "What's in a name?" Nothing less than all in all.

Heir Apparent

The longer a public figure stars in the vexatious role of "heir apparent," the thicker grow around him the shades of insipient failure. "Apparency" turns out to be a primordial curse. Stretching across centuries and continents, the juxtaposition of urbane **Moshe Sharett** with bumptious **John Adams** may be instructive.

Both men were patriots of impeccable pedigree.²⁰ Both were possessed of a rare intelligence, an exalted sense of honor, absolute rectitude, matchless dedication to public service, and, perhaps surprisingly, a richly gratifying domestic life.²¹ One notable point of departure: it was less his exceptional merit than expediency that catapulted **Adams** over others to become **George Washington's** heir apparent. A surfeit of talented Virginians required that New England's sensibilities should be appeased. **Moshe Sharett's** elevation, on the other hand, represented a universally anticipated climax. After working in tandem with **Ben-Gurion** since 1933, the Number Two man's claim was unrivalled.

A second distinction speaks volumes about the character of the protagonists and the succession: **Washington**, an instinctive patrician, did not think it fit or proper to intrude into the administration of his heir. This assuredly was not the way of **Ben-Gurion** whose differences with **Sharett** made him suspicious and irrepressibly intrusive. For one thing, he was continually dismayed by **Sharett's** high regard for the United Nations, in acronymic Hebrew "*OOM*," scene of many of his most exhilarating moments and highest accomplishments. Both were conscious that whenever **Ben-Gurion** scornfully exclaimed "*Oom, Shmoom*," a secondary target was his own foreign minister.

Another point of departure was that **Ben-Gurion** was inveterately distrustful of anything and anyone British. In sharp contrast, during **Sharett's** five years of study at the London School of Economics he developed a deep respect for the British parliamentary tradition and made many British friends, among them **Harold Laski**, a leading light among Britain's social democrats. In this respect, **Moshe Sharett** and **Chaim Weizmann** were two of a kind.

Finally, and most fundamentally, **Sharett** came to firmly believe that as an independent state Israel had to comport itself differently than it had when, as the Yishuv, it had merely aspired to statehood. In contrast **Ben-Gurion**, majestically indifferent to world opinion, was proactive in seizing promising opportunities to expand the country's borders.

Upon elevation to their highest offices, both **Adams** and **Sharett** suffered very troubled incumbencies. **Adams**'s administration was marked by his enthusiasm for the illiberal Alien and Sedition Acts. Overall, his presidency was middling. He is the first American president whose profile is **not** memorialized at Mount Rushmore and the only one of the first five - Founding Fathers all - to lose his bid for reelection. In fact, in the popular consciousness, only with the publication in 2001 of **David McCullough's** award-winning biography has America's original heir apparent claimed his rightful place in the Pantheon of its most esteemed patriots and political thinkers.

As for **Moshe Sharett**, for all of his brief incumbency as prime minister (1954–1955), his predecessor's continual sniping from Kibbutz Sde Boker - his supposed rustication in the Negev - ensured that he was constantly embattled. Sharett served for less than a year before finding a rejuvenated **Ben-Gurion** positioned as the supreme power broker within his cabinet. Acting in concert with hawks such as **Pinhas Lavon**, and **Golda Meir**, **Ben-Gurion** effectively mugged his own replacement.

Never having coveted high office for its own sake, the wounded **Moshe Sharett** had little stomach for a leadership struggle, especially one he could not possibly win. Without enlightening the public about his reasons, an omission he much regretted in later years, he tendered his resignation. His private thoughts he confided to his journal alone.

I have learned that in our generation the state of Israel cannot be ruled without deceit and adventurism. These are historical facts that cannot be altered. In the end, history will justify both the stratagems and deceit and acts of adventurism. All I know is that I, **Moshe Sharett**, am not capable of them, and I am therefore unsuited to lead this country.²²

Sharett was much mistaken. Not heeding their pretexts, history offers little sign of justifying expansionist escapades such as the Suez Campaign in 1956 or the incursion into Lebanon in 1982. On the other hand, notwithstanding **Sharett's** irritation with schemes to promote territorial enhancement and pointless retaliatory actions, one reason he left center stage

without publicly condemning them was that he knew too well that no matter what course of action Israel might have pursued, the Arabs had signaled no credible indication of desiring peace with the Jewish state.

Hamlet

During a portion of my adolescence, the poster that adorned my bedroom wall in our Bronx apartment portrayed neither Mickey Mantle nor Buddy Holly, both highly respected for their talent but in no way idolized. My hero was a brainy guy in his fifties with a prominent pate, clear eyes, and a dazzling rhetorical style. The poster was captioned with a self-referential message: "Let's Talk Sense to the American People." Alas, it proved to be an appallingly poor tactic. Lured by sensibility rather than good sense, twice in succession the



American people much preferred an even balder guy, one deficient in oratorical panache but, what I could not comprehend at the time, equipped with innate qualities of leadership. The affinity between my boyhood idol **Adlai Stevenson** and **Moshe Sharett** strikes me as illuminating.

As it happens, during that tense half-a-year between the UN General Assembly vote for the partition of Palestine into two states - culmination of the round-the-clock, round-the-calendar work by **Sharett** and the brilliant diplomatic team he had meticulously created and nurtured - and the declaration of an independent Jewish State of Israel, both **Dwight Eisenhower** and **Adlai Stevenson** played cameo roles in the jockeying to influence **Truman**.

As president, **Eisenhower** would establish cordial relations with **Moshe Sharett**, but back in the November of '47 he was prominent among the generals clustered around Secretary of State **George Marshall** that were allied with the State Department. Whereas the Arabists in the latter opposed the establishment of Israel on ideological grounds, the military opposed the partition of Palestine for strategic reasons: they were apprehensive that after

Arab armies overran the outgunned Jews, American troops would be drawn into the region as policemen. These military skeptics who questioned the viability of a Zionist state exercised considerable clout with **Truman**.

Meanwhile **Stevenson**, not yet governor of Illinois, had made his mark as a strong supporter of the United Nations and an influential Democratic Party voice against Midwestern isolationism. In 1947 he joined with internationalists such as **Herbert Lehman**, **John Foster Dulles**, **Thomas Dewey**, and **Arthur Vandenberg** in pressuring Congress and the President to accept the UNSCOP plan for the partition of Palestine. Awkwardly poised in the middle was the vacillating American president who in later years, for his instantaneous recognition of the Jewish State, would be beatified as a Zionist saint. In the critical months between November '47 and May '48, however, **Truman** was wishy-washy and irresolute, and more than once expressed resentment over being beleaguered by "*pushy Jews*."²³

Not alone because both men performed so brilliantly in the debating chambers of the United Nations may **Sharett** be linked with **Stevenson**. They were two of a kind: urbane, articulate, intellectual, multifaceted, polyglot, cautious, and cognizant of privileged upbringings and patrician status within their very different milieus. Most salient, both men bore reputations as contemporary avatars of Hamlet - princes of indecision. Not once, not twice but on three extended occasions, **Stevenson** would dither famously over whether he would or could or should make a run for the presidency, thus effectively compromising the very outcome. As for **Sharett**, an inner compulsion to exhaustively examine the north, south, east, west, top, and underside of every dicey situation, of which there are legion in Israel's neighborhood, persistently raised questions about his steadfastness, inner strength, and capacity to lead. This impression of the two men meant that when it mattered most, their best efforts to talk sense to their respective peoples were thwarted.

Crestfallen by **Stevenson's** failure to find favor with the American electorate, for years I mourned his stillborn presidencies, harboring fantasies that they would have been brilliant. Alas, these reflections on the short, sad, unavailing tenure in the highest office of his Israeli

counterpart have finally put paid to those illusions. **Stevenson** and **Sharett** were made of uncommon clay. They were princes of intellect, models of integrity, public men of rare ability, and sources of inspiration. But more in the line of prophets than of kings, indeed like Prince Hamlet or recent avatars such as **Václav Havel**, they truly were not meant for rule.

Lonesome Dove

The metamorphosis of **Moshe Sharett** from a dispassionate hardliner of the 1930s to a dove who often flew solo in the 1950s was partly a matter of substance, partly of perception. Its broad course may be discerned in his writings on the highly sensitive question of the disposition of the Arab population of Palestine, but what is all too easy to lose sight of is that prior to the Six-Day War, there was no “Palestinian Question.” The main concern on the agenda of the Yishuv was relations between Israel and the neighboring Arab countries. About this, **Sharett** was consistent: he wished to de-escalate tensions and to strive for even a modicum of peace in the hope of eventually clearing a path toward the real thing. In contrast, **Ben-Gurion, Dayan, Pinhas Sapir, Golda Meir** and others actively welcomed a second round with the Arabs in order to create an opportunity to make “border corrections.” Notwithstanding his consistency, it is easy to see how **Sharett**’s musings might superficially be viewed as Machiavellian:

Transfer could be the crowning achievement, the final stage in the development of [our] policy, but certainly not the point of departure. By speaking publicly and prematurely, we could mobilize vast forces against the matter and cause it to fail. When the Jewish state is established it is very possible that the result will be the transfer of the [Palestinian] Arabs.²⁴

In a letter four years later to **Chaim Weizmann**, known for his moderation, **Sharett** could easily be regarded as overtly callous:

With regard to the refugees, we are determined to be adamant while the war lasts. Once the return tide starts, it will be impossible to stem it, and it will prove our undoing. As for the future, we are equally determined to explore all possibilities of

getting rid, once and for all, of the huge Arab minority which originally threatened us.²⁵

Five years further on, however, upon learning details of the Massacre at Qibya,²⁶ **Sharett** was aghast. The following entry appears in his diary: *“A reprisal of this magnitude has never been carried out before. I paced back and forth in my room perplexed and completely depressed, feeling helpless.”* Had he known there would be so much killing, he *“would have screamed to high heaven.”*²⁷

In 1955 **Sharett** was more sharply at odds than ever with his hawkish cabinet in which a majority thought they were being presented with a heaven-sent opportunity by the French and British to expand Israel's borders by launching a coordinated preventive war against Egypt. Only **Sharett** accurately foresaw the futility of such a venture. His opposition again proved ineffectual not only because he was outgunned by his own cabinet but also quite possibly because of a strain of residual ambivalence in his perception of the situation:

Deep down, however, he probably agreed with **Ben-Gurion's** basic contention that the Arabs were not ready to make peace, no matter how Israel behaved, and that they would acquiesce in Israel's existence only after becoming convinced that Israel was simply too strong to destroy.²⁸

By 1957, however, in an address that set forth the two possible avenues toward the future, **Moshe Sharett** publicly signaled how far he had distanced himself from the hard line perspective. Even putting aside humanitarian considerations, he had now embraced the dovish approach as the more productive.

The activists believe that the Arabs understand only the language of force. The state of Israel must, from time to time, prove clearly that it is strong, and able and willing to use force in a devastating and highly effective way. If it does not prove this, it will be swallowed up, and perhaps wiped off the face of the earth. As to

peace, it is doubtful, in any case, very remote. If peace comes, it will come only if [the Arabs] are convinced that this country cannot be beaten...

The other approach [is that] not even for one moment must the matter of peace vanish from our calculation. This is not only a political calculation; in the long run, this is a decisive security consideration...We must restrain our responses [to Arab provocations].²⁹

Journalist

Sharett's original ascent to position and power was through journalism. The quality of his occasional dispatches in 1925, near the end of his five years of studies in London, led **Berl Katznelson** to offer him the post of deputy editor of *Davar*, the newly launched organ of the Labor Party. Sharett's cogency, lucidity, and graceful style brought him wide recognition.

In 1931 **Haim Arlosoroff**, nominated by the World Zionist Organization to head the political department of the Jewish Agency, conditioned his acceptance upon **Sharett** becoming his assistant. In passing, **Sharett** learned an important lesson from **Arlosoroff**: When he himself assumed responsibility for the Agency's foreign office and later the foreign ministry of the State of Israel, he also assembled a lean but extraordinarily capable team of fledgling diplomats with whom to work, one that included young **Abba Eban**, his eventual successor.

Superior as his early journalism was, **Sharett** hit his stride as a private "journalist" only between 1953 and 1956, a period that, hardly accidentally, happens to coincide with his tenure as prime minister. Dated September 9, 1953, the opening entry in his diary provides the rationale for what would turn out to be **Sharett's** uniquely momentous contribution to Israeli historiography.

I am beginning to write a diary because I have been overtaken by a sudden urge to record something of the intensive stream of events which makes up

my life. This urge has struck me several times in the past but the enterprise was simply too demanding...My powers would fail me. I do not know why this very evening I was out of the blue filled with the courage to start writing.³⁰

Sometimes nightly, sometimes at intervals of weeks, **Sharett** would record his unwashed impressions of people and events. Excerpts from this running record, edited by his son **Ya'akov** (himself a successful journalist), appeared first in early 1978 in *Ma'ariv*; they ran in ten weekly installments. Later that year the journals were published in eight volumes, some 2,500 pages in all. They have been widely regarded as a treasure trove of reliability, the reflections of an acute, sensitive insider about the deeds and misdeeds of Israel at a critical watershed in its history.

Especially among professional historians, they have been received eagerly and exercise immense influence. Indeed, the Sharett diaries may be viewed as the *fons et origo* of the movement that burgeoned into a historical revisionism which has decisively affected the writings even of its avowed opponents.

In 1994 **Ya'akov Sharett** established the **Moshe Sharett Heritage Society** which is dedicated to perpetuating the thought and legacy of his father through publication. The first volume, a collection of letters from the WW I years when **Sharett** served in the Ottoman army, was published in 1998. Since then, the **Society** has published one or more new volumes annually. Its current publication, ***Moshe Sharett and the German Reparations Controversy***, appeared late last year. Running to 973 pages, it has received considerable attention. One reviewer, for example, [Yossi Sarid] wondered aloud, "What could possibly be of interest in a book that is a collection of minutes from debates in the cabinet, Knesset, Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee, original documents, correspondence, and entries from personal journals?"³¹

He concluded that it was "the most interesting boring book I have read in the past few years," being absolutely essential reading for anyone curious about "the most

dramatic, incisive, painful debate ever held in Israel.”

The only biography of **Moshe Sharett** to date has been a valuable, lengthy but lackluster account of his public life by revisionist historian **Gabriel Sheffer**. In the absence of a **David McCullough** who might breathe into dry bones and warm them, the journalist firm of **Sharett & Son** offers by far most penetrating vista into the heart and mind of this pivotal, complicated, and most troubled Zionist figure.

Jew

Moshe Sharett was not a conventionally observant Jew, but neither was he an indifferent one. If infrequently he took it into his head to attend services on Saturday, he never recited *Kiddush* at home. When abroad, however, **Sharett** delighted in chanting it whenever invited to a Jewish home, and in the final decade he expressed regret at not having instituted the practice when his children were young. Still, during the time his three children were at home, he used to take them to Jerusalem's Yeshurun Synagogue for *Kol Nidrei*, return home for a festive meal, and then on the morrow go to the Kotel for *Nei'la*. On the other hand, throughout his life he celebrated Passover by punctiliously conducting a traditional Seder.

Sharett was deeply disturbed that most young Israelis were appallingly ignorant about the content of the *Siddur*, and he was always responsive to the religious sensibilities of observant Jews; whenever, for example, his official car arrived in Jerusalem on Shabbat, he would exit from his vehicle and walk the rest of the way home. In sum, **Moshe Sharett** not only appreciated Jewish tradition but, with the passage of time, seemed increasingly to embrace it.³²

Over and above the foregoing, in his stance vis-à-vis Palestinian Arabs, **Sharett's** appropriation of traditional Jewish modalities makes him far more relevant today than other public figures of his era. Virtually alone among key Mapai public figures of his generation, he did not devalue the humanity of the Arabs. However remote the prospect, he never discredited the hope, indeed the eventual necessity of reaching

an accord with them. Even though peace tarried, **Moshe Sharett** patiently waited and watched daily for any sign of its coming.

What kind of “faith” is this? I would maintain quintessentially Jewish variety. It’s the same sort of faith Jews have traditionally maintained in the coming of the Messiah: “perfect” at one level, to be sure, but simultaneously skeptical because of the parade of dissembling, false messiahs who have punctuated our history. It is a modality of thought informed by the realization that while belief alone cannot bring on either Messiah or peace, its absence eternally aborts the very possibility. It is akin to **Herzl**’s startlingly visionary version of “I Have a Dream” oratory, whose roots are so blatantly Old Testament: “If you will it, it is no dream.”

*I was of three minds,
Like a tree
In which there are three blackbirds.*

Moshe Sharett’s greatness resided in his capacity to simultaneously embrace three mindsets—the past, the present, and the future—a prerequisite for sure-footedly advancing towards that future.

Such, one senses, is why his legacy is today in the ascendancy.

A Hero of Our Time?

Because he departed from the scene in the twilight of what some now view as Israel’s prelapsarian beginnings, because he came to espouse unfashionably moderate views about the humanity of the Arabs, the undesirability of heaping humiliations on them, and about the eventual necessity of coming to terms with them, for several decades after his death the reputation of **Moshe Sharett** underwent a chilling eclipse. The wheel spins: for those selfsame reasons, a still modest but nonetheless palpable **Sharett** revival is well underway.

In the near future the **Sharett Heritage Society** will be issuing a one-volume, abridged edition of the original diaries, now out of print and difficult to obtain. This news has been greeted with considerable excitement. The reason is that with their serialization and multi-volume publication, **Sharett's** stature has already risen inordinately. In a way, these journals may be viewed as ammunition in a son's reprisal campaign against his father's detractors and calumniators, for the most part men of far lesser achievement and ability, a monument to the triumph of a man of words over men of many dubious deeds.

When **Ben-Gurion** reascended to the premiership in 1955, **Sharett** stayed on a foreign minister, in May of 1956 he was forced to tender his resignation. No longer a member of the cabinet at the time of the Sinai Campaign, he consequently has become a hero of the Israeli intelligentsia and the moderate left. Consider how his diary has been regarded by a well-known historian who is also a highly regarded journalist.

Moshe Sharett's diary is one of the most important sources for the history of Israel. It was first published in 1978 – more than a million words of statesmanship and personal frustration. For a time, the diary nourished a kind of underground cult. There were people who knew whole pages by heart – one would start a sentence, his friend would complete it. People also read the diary in groups, growing addicted not only to the political revelations of the prime minister and foreign minister and his dovish outlook, but also to the emotional intimacy of his writing, all in an inspired style rich with original verbal coinages. If **Sharett** had been asked for his opinion, he would probably have opposed the Sinai Campaign, and when he returned home [from a trip to India], he wrote in his diary, "*My country has parted from me.*"³³

Or consider the response of a former cabinet minister and fellow journalist.

At the time, **Sharett's** political legacy seemed orphaned and doomed to having no heirs. **Ben-Gurion's** heirs multiplied, filling the land, whereas **Sharett** had no successors, no disciples. As I read *The Reparations Controversy*, I repeatedly thought about the way history's judgment is sometimes delayed. Considering the present situation, **Sharett's** disciples and spiritual heirs today appear to outnumber **Ben-Gurion's**. Even **Ben-Gurion's** most loyal disciple, President **Shimon Peres**, has been more of a Sharettist in recent years than a Ben-Gurionist, although he might find it difficult to admit this for sentimental and public-image reasons.³⁴

His words recited antiphonally in the coffee houses. Even **Shimon Peres** a discreet fellow traveler, a "Sharettist," "Thus, the whirligig of time brings in his revenges."³⁵ Can one imagine sweeter retribution for years of playing second fiddle, marginalization by the "activists," being driven so unceremoniously from the highest seat of power, and disregard by the meandering mainstream? Through the power of his pen, the fealty of his son, and the turn of the historical wheel, **Moshe Sharett**, already an underground hero, seems destined to become an Israeli icon.

Notes

¹ From "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" to which I am manifestly indebted.

² **Illustrious Relative:** It is customary to declare a personal interest: my father **Samuel Chertok**, ז"ל, was nine years younger than **Moshe Shertok**, his first cousin. They were both born in Kherson on the Crimean Peninsula, then in Russia, today the Ukraine. As far as I am aware, their only meeting as adults occurred during a family gathering in April of 1947 at my grandfather's home in Brooklyn. As a group photo attests, among the fifteen persons surrounding **Moshe Shertok** is **Harvey Chertok**, a lad sporting a slightly askew clip-on bow tie and displaying his most winning smile. My fragile looking Grandfather **Joseph Chertok** rests an arm upon my shoulder. In the back row my father and Uncle **Leo Chertok** stand erect as Swiss Guardsmen.

Perhaps five years later, when I was attending Hebrew School in the Bronx, Rabbi **Hyman Barras**, z"l, inquired whether I would follow the example of my illustrious relative and one day go to live in Israel. Caught off guard, I had no idea at the ready whom he was talking about, and the fanciful notion of leaving America had never entered my mind. Rabbi **Barras** gently refreshed my memory. When I related the incident to my parents, they assured me that going to live in Israel was certainly not a serious possibility. Yet that episode left a far stronger impression than anything else that ever happened at Hebrew School.

I now regard Rabbi **Barras's** remark as proleptic. When more than three decades ago I did move to Israel, I reunited two strands of the **Chertok** (or **Shertok**) family that had separated in 1905. The three talented children of my father's cousin have become local cousins and good friends. This essay, however, is my first stab at taking the measure of my most illustrious relative.

³ **Ya'akov Sharett**, "A Dove Among Hawks: Moshe Sharett — The Political Tragedy of an Israeli Leader," *Midstream*, May/June 2004, p. 20.

⁴ **Yael Medini** (**Moshe Sharett's** daughter) interviewed in Tel Aviv, January 7, 2008.

⁵ **Benny Morris**, *Righteous Victims: A History of the Zionist-Arab Conflict, 1881-1999*, New York: Knopf, 1999, p. 91. It appeared in a letter written to friends from Istanbul on February 12, 1914 and was reprinted in *Ha'aretz*, Dec. 1, 1995.

⁶ **Ya'akov Sharett**, p. 23.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 22-23.

⁸ **Gabriel Sheffer**, *Moshe Sharett: Biography of a Political Moderate*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996, p. 27.

⁹ Ibid., p. 35.

¹⁰ Ibid. p. 39.

¹¹ **Benny Morris**, p. 91.

¹² Ibid., p. 111.

¹³ **Yael Medini**, op. cit.

¹⁴ **Gabriel Sheffer**, p. 234.

¹⁵ **Ariel L. Feldstein**, “Did It Really Hang on One Vote? The Resolution Establishing the State of Israel,” *Midstream*, May/June 2006, p. 15.

¹⁶ **Gabriel Sheffer**, p. 305.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 329.

¹⁸ **Shakespeare**, *Julius Caesar*, IV, 3, ll. 217-220.

¹⁹ **Gabriel Sheffer**, p. 330.

²⁰ **Moshe Sharett's** father **Ya'acov Shertok** was one of the fourteen original members of Bilu, the first organized group of Jewish pioneers to resettle Palestine. Arriving in 1882, after four frustratingly difficult years, he went back to Russia. In 1906 he returned to Palestine together with much of his extended family.

²¹ From Paris and London on diplomatic missions, **Adams** addressed hundreds of letters to his “Dearest Friend” or “Miss Adorable” (Abigail); from service in the

Turkish army during WW I, incarceration in Latrun, and Lake Success **Sharett** dispatched as many to “My Zipporah,” and occasionally “My-my-my Zipporah.”

²² **Simha Flapan**, *Zionism and the Palestinians*, London: Croom Helm, 1979, pp. 52-53.

²³ **Gabriel Sheffer**, p.288.

²⁴ **Moshe Sharett** in “Protocols of the Jewish Executive,” May 7, 1944, cited by **Benny Morris**, op. cit., p. 254.

²⁵ **Moshe Sharett** on August 18, 1948, cited by **Simha Flapan**, op. cit., p. 105.

²⁶ Infiltrators from this Jordanian village murdered an Israeli mother and two children.

While **Sharett** was in New York, acting Defense Minister **Pinhas Lavon** ordered a reprisal raid. **Sharett's** urgent demand that the raid be cancelled was ignored. On October 14-15, 1953, led by Major **Ariel (Arik) Sharon**, Israel commandos killed sixty-nine civilians and leveled the village. **Sharett**, “horrified by the scale and brutality of the action,” proposed that an official statement expressing regret be issued. Instead the cabinet voted to implement **Ben-Gurion's** suggestion that the raid be attributed to irate Israeli villagers rather than to the IDF. Vide **Avi Shlaim**, *The Iron Wall: Israel and the Arab World*, New York: Norton, 2000. pp. 90 - 93.

²⁷ **Benny Morris**, *Righteous Victims*, p, 278.

²⁸ **Benny Morris**, “Moshe Sharett: In Ben-Gurion's Long Shadow,” Berkeley: University of California, *Journal of Palestine Studies*, XXVI, Summer 1997, p. 110.

²⁹ **Benny Morris**, *Righteous Victims*, p. 280.

³⁰ **Moshe Sharett**, Communicated by **Ya'akov Sharett**, February 3, 2008.

³¹ **Yossi Sarid**, "Israel's Great Debate", Haaretz, September 9, 2007.

³² **Ya'akov Sharett** and **Yael Medini**, communicated on February 3, 2008.

³³ **Tom Segev**, "Unpublished Sharett Diaries Dig Deeper into Defense Minister Lavon, *Haaretz*, August 30, 2007.

³⁴ **Yossi Sarid**, op. cit.

³⁵ **Shakespeare**, *Twelfth Night*, V, 1, l. 388.