

Neil Caplan and Yaakov Sharett, eds.

My Struggle for Peace: The Diary of Moshe Sharett,

1953–1956, vol. 1, 1953–1954

(Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2019), 557 pp. ISBN 978-0-253-03735-0

My Struggle for Peace: The Diary of Moshe Sharett,

1953–1956, vol. 2, 1955

(Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2019), 651 pp. ISBN 978-0-253-03758-9

My Struggle for Peace: The Diary of Moshe Sharett,

1953–1956, vol. 3, 1956

(Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2019), 735 pp. ISBN 978-0-253-037362-6

Review by: Itamar Rabinovich

Source: *Bustan: The Middle East Book Review*, 2020, Vol. 11, No. 2 (2020), pp. 247-250

Published by: Penn State University Press

The 1978 publication of the eight-volume personal diary of Moshe Sharett by his son, Yaakov (Kobi) Sharett, was a milestone in the evolution of the historiography of the State of Israel and Israeli-Arab relations. Moshe Sharett was Israel's first foreign minister (1948–56) and second prime minister, replacing David Ben-Gurion who in 1953 retired temporarily to Kibbutz Sde Boker in the south of the country. Moshe Sharett was a prolific writer and diary keeper but his original diary was "a political diary." In the years 1953–56, when he was about to become prime minister and during his tenure, he kept a personal diary. Its publication provided the Hebrew reader with an unprecedented window into Israeli politics and policymaking as well as with an unusual personal document reflecting a senior leader's actions, reflections, outlook, and agony. Prior to the massive opening of Israel State Archives and the availability of other sources for the country's history in the 1950s, it became a crucial source for anyone

interested in policymaking at the highest level and in the personalities of those who made it. Sharett was a gifted man with an observing eye and an eloquent pen, and his descriptions and reflections proved to be intriguing.

Yet another dimension of the text was the reflection of Sharett's complex relationship with Ben-Gurion. Sharett never disputed Ben-Gurion's seniority and greatness but found it impossible to cope with Ben-Gurion's conduct toward him. Sharett knew well that Ben-Gurion did not want him as his replacement (he preferred Levi Eshkol) and was perceptive enough to notice Ben-Gurion's occasional disrespect. At the time many readers felt that the text would have benefited from the omission of numerous details and manifestations of Sharett's frustration with Ben-Gurion and with other actors and aspects of the period.

And yet, the wealth of material enhanced by Sharett's eloquence and perceptive eye turn the diary into an indispensable source of Israel's history in its first decade and for several aspects of Israeli politics, the Arab-Israeli conflict, and Israel's relationship with the international system. Needless to say, access to the diaries was limited to Hebrew readers.

Kobi Sharett, who devoted his life to the preservation of his father's legacy and to the publication of his political writing, has added a very significant component to his life project by teaming up with Canadian historian Neil Caplan in order to produce a shorter, more compact version of the diary in three volumes. The result is a classic case of "shorter is better." The editors eliminated many of the petty details from the diary, enriched the text with a sophisticated apparatus, and made it accessible to international readership and to the scholarly community that does not read Hebrew.

The title they chose for the three volumes (*My Struggle for Peace*) is somewhat misleading. At the time, a peace settlement between Israel and the Arabs was not feasible. The 1948 war ended with an Israeli victory, the expansion of Israel's territory beyond the territory allocated to it by the UN in November 1947, the absence of an Arab-Palestinian state and the creation of the Palestinian refugee problem. The war did not end with a peace settlement but

with a series of armistice agreements. At the time, the Israeli leadership believed that armistice agreements were preferable to a peace settlement that would include the loss of the country's southern tip and access to the Red Sea, as well as the return of refugees. Sharett fully shared Ben-Gurion's view in this matter.

In May 1949, when Moshe Sharett met with Jordan's King Abdullah, the King opened with a general lecture on the need for peace and on the preparation of public opinion for this end. I said that we were certainly interested in peace and that therefore we attach such a great importance to solving the problems that are still open. We were disappointed by the suspension of the work of the special committee that should have completed its inquiry into two questions: Mt. Scopus and Latrun.... There are additional questions that call for a practical settlement.... The King asked whether we merely intended to solve practical questions or did we think that the question of peace should be discussed in its entirety and a comprehensive settlement be reached? I said that in our opinion, progress should be made gradually. The armistice agreement had laid the foundation and so we should now be resolving the outstanding questions and finally we will build the roof, which is comprehensive peace.¹

Israel changed its mind a few months later and did negotiate a full-fledged peace treaty with Abdullah. A text was agreed upon and initiated but by that time Abdullah did not have the political ability to implement it. A few years later Sharett was involved in an effort to reach an understanding with Egypt's new ruler, Gamal 'Abd al-Nasser, but this effort failed as well. In fact, until 1967 a peace settlement between Israel and the Arabs or some of the Arab states could not be reached because the Arab demand for a massive concession by Israel in order to make up for the loss and humiliation of 1948 could not be met. It was the Six Day War in June 1967 that produced the territorial assets that could be used

¹ Itamar Rabinovich, *The Road Not Taken: Early Arab-Israeli Negotiators* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 58–59.

as bargaining chips in a peace settlement with Arab states. The notion of “territories for peace” created the profound split that has become the fault line of Israeli politics since 1967 and continues to divide Israeli society and politics to date.

The title chosen by Caplan and Sharett for the English version of the Sharett diaries reflects the view held by some students of Israeli politics who regard Moshe Sharett as the spiritual father or harbinger of the dovish school in Israeli politics and foreign policy. This is not precise since the issues confronting Israeli policymakers in the 1950s were fundamentally different from those confronting it at present. In all likelihood, had Moshe Sharett been alive in and after 1967 he would have supported the notion of “territories for peace,” but unfortunately he passed away in 1965. As foreign minister under Ben-Gurion and as prime minister he did not pursue a policy of seeking a feasible settlement with the Arab World, but he did preach moderation. He objected to the policy of retaliation against attacks from across the Egyptian and Jordanian borders; he believed that Israel should work with the UN and with the mixed armistice commissions and should act moderately and pragmatically regarding the complex issues along the Israeli-Syrian armistice lines. Sharett lost the bureaucratic battle between the foreign ministry and the defense establishment; Ben-Gurion supported the latter and policy was determined by generals and not by diplomats. As prime minister, Sharett was bedeviled not only by Ben-Gurion’s lingering presence but by the lack of cooperation from Defense Minister Pinchas Lavon and Chief of Staff Moshe Dayan. Time and again his diaries reflect not only the failure to impose his authority but the repeated discoveries that he was not told the full truth in numerous cases. Nadav Safran named the period 1949 to 1956 as “the festering of the conflict.” The Sharett diaries provide a rich documentation of how this process unfolded with errors and misjudgments committed by both sides.

An equally important dimension of the diaries is the rich documentation of Israeli party politics and parliamentary life: The prominent politicians Left and Right, the politics of the ruling Mapai Party, and coalition politics. The description is enriched by Sharett’s talent as a writer. His likes and dislikes are evident and

some of his character descriptions are most valuable. His relationship with Ben-Gurion remains the book's main theme. Admiration and a sober view of the great man's weaknesses are evident. Occasionally, Sharett stood up to Ben-Gurion and did so well. Thus when Ben-Gurion came up with the idea that Israel should team up with Lebanon's Christians in order to break the cycle of Arab hostility, Sharett responded with a sober analysis that explained the futility of such a notion. It is a pity that the authors of Israel's Lebanon policy in 1982 did not consult this text.

In sum, the large community of researchers and lay readers interested in Israeli politics, Arab-Israeli relations, and Middle Eastern politics should be grateful to Neil Caplan and Yaakov Sharett for this herculean effort.

Itamar Rabinovich, Tel Aviv University, itrabi@gmail.com

doi: 10.5325/bustan.11.2.0247