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THE ETHICAL DILEMMAS OF GOLDA MEIR

BY

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Department of the Army Civilian**

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ABSTRACT

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Golda Meir was one of the extraordinary strategic leaders of the twentieth century. A woman of immense stamina, drive, and charisma, she played a major role in every phase of the political and military struggle that led to the creation of the State of Israel. From pre-nation strife to recognized statehood, Golda Meir was relentless in her quest to realize her dream of a unique society where Jews determined their own destinies. Her unswerving devotion, however, came at great personal cost. This study addresses the ethical dilemmas of Golda Meir as she sought to reconcile her complete absorption with her ideals with parental expectations, traditional responsibilities and duties of wife and mother, and how she came to grips with the her most challenging experience as Prime Minister of Israel.

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INTRODUCTION

I ask only one thing, that I be understood and believed.
My social activities are not an accidental thing; they are
an absolute necessity for me.

Golda Meir

Golda Meir was one of the extraordinary strategic leaders of the twentieth century. A woman of immense stamina, drive, and charisma, she played a major role in every phase of the political and military struggle which led to the creation of the State of Israel. From pre-nation strife to recognized statehood, Golda Meir was relentless in her quest to realize her dream of a unique society where Jews determined their own destiny.

After the establishment of Israel, Golda Meir unselfishly served her country for over four decades. In each service role--Minister to Soviet Russia, Minister of Labor and Transport, Foreign Minister, and Prime Minister--she gave whatever it took to meet the prodigious challenges. Her unswerving devotion, however, came at great personal cost. Golda Meir succeeded in her efforts to help build a Jewish state, but failed at marriage and continually questioned her worth as a mother. Her most tragic nightmare resulted from the imprudent decisions made prior to the Yom Kippur War. That event, more than all others, tormented her.

The purpose of this paper is to address the ethical dilemmas of Golda Meir as she sought to reconcile her complete absorption with her ideals with parental expectations, traditional responsibilities and duties of a wife and mother, and how she came to grips with her most challenging experience as Prime Minister of Israel.

BACKGROUND

Born in Kiev in Ukraine in 1898 during a period of raging anti-Semitism, Golda Meir's early years were characterized by political violence from the non-Jewish community, economic insecurity, and growing political activity among young Zionists.¹ The onset of World War I brought more intense anti-Jewish violence and reports of pogroms throughout Eastern Europe.²

Over the next two decades, these indignities persisted; but it was the Holocaust that made the creation of the Jewish state imperative if Jews, as a nation, were to survive.³ It was this environment that helped Golda Meir shape her ideals, establish her sense of Jewish identity, and commit to the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine. By age 23, she was set on a course that would take her to the pinnacle of the future Jewish state. Golda Meir was fascinated by the political climate and driven to be a full participant in the Zionist movement.⁴

The foundation for her role as a leader was actually laid at age 17 on the street corners of Milwaukee. It was there that she became a stirring and eloquent speaker for the Labor Zionist movement.⁵ Through her Zionist activity, it became clear that she could direct and organize other people. She demonstrated this by her persuasive oratories on emigrating Jews and as a fund-raiser and salesperson for a Zionist newspaper.⁶

Golda Meir's adeptness at speaking the language of the Zionist participants (English and Yiddish), coupled with her straight forward and simple message, motivated her listeners while building trust and cohesion at the grass roots level. She accomplished this by focusing on basic social issues which centered around human and civil rights of Jews. Golda Meir knew there had to be a radical solution to the outrages inflicted upon Jews worldwide. That solution had to be one place where Jews could settle without quotas and where they controlled their own destiny.⁷

Golda Meir's gripping appeals to help rectify the injustices suffered by Jews caused many of her listeners to donate funds to support the Jewish relief effort. Her fervent participation in the Zionist movement was the first stepping-stone toward the rest of her political career.

The next step came after Golda Meir moved to Palestine. It seemed that no matter where she went, Golda Meir quickly emerged a citadel of strength and moral fortitude.

Upon leaving Milwaukee and traveling to Palestine, she became a member of a kibbutz. Golda Meir soon became a symbol of not only physical but emotional strength for the other members of the kibbutz. She was always accessible, regardless of the hour, to offer encouragement to those less strong who struggled with the sometimes harsh life in the kibbutz.⁸ Golda Meir brought with her the intellectual trappings of America's pioneer past, its struggle for independence, and liberties. These were all part of the American dream which had served to strengthen her Zionist vision.⁹ Because of her level-headed steadfastness, within a year of her arrival, she became the kibbutz delegate to the newly formed council of the Histadrut,¹⁰ the trade union of Jewish workers in Palestine.

More than a decade later, Golda Meir played a prominent role in the Palestinian Labor Party by accepting the job as secretary of the Women's Labor Council of the Histadrut where she served as the Women's Council representative. Serving as secretary helped her revalidate her sense of participation in the creation of a Jewish homeland and renewed her understanding of the meaning and purpose of the movement.¹¹ Golda Meir viewed the Histadrut as more than an organization of workers. It would become a shadow government and vehicle for creating the Jewish state.

Golda Meir represented the council at several international labor congresses and was a delegate to the Pioneer Women, a sister organization in the United States. The real beginning of her Zionist

political activity began in 1929 when she was elected a delegate to the World Zionist Organization.¹²

From that point on, Golda Meir was a prominent player in the emergence of the state of Israel. From her position as secretary to the Women's Labor Council, she was appointed minister of labor and social insurance and, subsequently, foreign minister. In these positions, she dealt handily with the increased complexities of Israel's external environment while addressing the many internal social issues of the homeland. Externally, she established political and economic relations with the majority of the African states.¹³ Concurrently, she traveled extensively throughout the United States and Great Britain building support and raising funds for the Jewish settlers and Histadrut programs.¹⁴ Internally, Golda Meir successfully solved the problems of housing and employment for the masses of new immigrants who came to Israel following its proclamation of independence in 1948.¹⁵ She immersed herself in every detail from architecture to sanitation while fund raising all over the world. Having addressed these immediate problems, Golda Meir then focused on longer range issues of establishing labor laws and safeguards against exploitation of women workers. The accomplishment of such tasks required a leader who saw the necessity of creating a positive political and economic climate and establishing policies directed at achieving the vision. For Golda Meir, every action was a deliberate move toward the establishment of a free and independent homeland for Jews, devoid of human indignities.

In July 1979, Golda Meir was elected Prime Minister. Her vision of a Zionist state had been realized and she had been a major contributor to that realization.

She continued to organize and gain support for her cause through her persuasive and hard-hitting speeches. Her indefatigability and tenacity were awesome and admirable to her countrymen and external statesmen. Established alliances with the United States, extensive contacts and

cooperative efforts between Israel and nonaligned states of Asia and Africa attest to her diplomatic prowess.¹⁶

From her days on the street corners of Milwaukee through her term as Prime Minister, Golda Meir's message appealed to the moral sense of those to whom she spoke, especially the members of the Jewish state. She remained, throughout her life, a source of courage and inspiration.

EARLY CONFLICTS

Golda Meir's life was fraught with internal struggles from her teenage years throughout her adult life because she adhered tenaciously to her ideals. The struggles began with the clash with her parents over her zeal for learning and desire to attend high school and eventually become a teacher. She wanted a vocation that was "intellectual and socially useful."¹⁷

In the early 1900s, however, high school was not the "proper" aspiration for a woman. Golda Meir's parents strongly disapproved of her ambition of being a teacher and desire to be independent. They viewed education beyond elementary school as an unwarranted luxury and undesirable.

After she completed elementary school, the goal of Golda Meir's parents was that she marry well. Her parents pointed out that, since Wisconsin state law forbade women teachers to marry, if she insisted on acquiring a profession, she should attend secretarial school and become a shorthand typist. Otherwise she could resign herself to being a spinster. Golda Meir's father warned her that men did not like smart girls.

Golda Meir's sense of justice was outraged by this logic.¹⁸ In defiance of her parents, she began high school in the autumn of 1912. To sever all economic dependence on her parents,

Golda Meir worked after school and on weekends at various odd jobs. The disputes with her parents, nevertheless, continued. Golda Meir declared that she would “rather die than spend her life-or any part of it hunched over a typewriter in some dingy office.”¹⁹

With the support of her sister, Golda Meir secretly escaped her parents’ home and moved to Denver where she attended high school. The departure left her filled with guilt about hurting her parents and abandoning her younger sister. As an adult thinking back on that episode, Golda Meir pondered how terribly hurt her parents must have been as they read her farewell note.²⁰

After two years in Denver, Golda Meir’s father asked her to return home. She returned to Milwaukee, graduated high school and, in the fall of 1916 registered at the Milwaukee Normal School (the Teacher’s Training College) without protests from her parent. This became the lifestyle of Golda Meir. Although she was often filled with anguish over a decision, if she felt her decision would ultimately serve a greater cause, she stood by it. She knew that she would be able to make a greater social contribution as a teacher than if she adhered to the traditional wishes of her parents.

RELATIONSHIP WITH HER HUSBAND

The same resoluteness and vision that characterized Golda Meir in her early years carried over into her adult life and marriage. She married Morris Myerson in 1917 at the age of nineteen. The marriage was based, in a large part, on Morris’ promise to move to Palestine.²¹ In 1921 they moved to Palestine and settled in a kibbutz called Merhavia where they lived for two years. While life in Merhavia was a happy time for Golda Meir, the very features of communal existence so attractive to her were completely abhorrent to Morris.

Golda Meir relished every aspect of the kibbutz. It suited her ideology and personality. She thrived on being with "her kind of people;" people who shared her political and social views and seriously debated social problems.

She found the hard work invigorating. Golda Meir felt at home, as though she had never lived any place else. Within a year she was selected to represent the kibbutz at the newly formed Council of the Histdarut where she gained recognition at various conferences and committees.²²

Ironically, Morris regarded these same features as barriers to happiness.²³ He was appalled by the lack of privacy where everyone washed together in the communal washroom, ate together in the communal dining room, and met every evening for other social activities ranging from communal discussions to song fests and parties. Even clean clothing was taken from the communal clothing shelves.²⁴

There was additional friction between Golda Meir and her husband on the issue of having children. In Milwaukee she insisted she wanted her children to be born and raised in Palestine. Although Morris wanted children very much, he refused to have them in the kibbutz where they would be brought up in a Children's House by a housemother who rotated every month. He demanded that Golda Meir leave Merhavia so they could establish a normal family life.

Golda Meir adamantly refused. She and Morris had married on the condition that they live in Palestine. To her that meant living in a kibbutz.²⁵

Most difficult for Morris was the fact that he lacked the physique for the backbreaking work of the kibbutz.²⁶ His inability to cope with the physical demands of the austere and demanding environment resulted in physical illness.

Life in the kibbutz became very complicated for Golda Meir as a result of Morris' recurrent bouts with malaria, the harsh climate, and unpalatable food. After two and a half years, they left

the kibbutz under the advice of a doctor who warned that Morris would be chronically ill unless he left Merhavia.

Torn with guilt, compassion, and love for her husband, Golda Meir consented to compromise. Morris agreed to remain in Palestine and she agreed to leave Merhavia and become a housewife and mother.²⁷

Golda Meir often worried that she had failed to be sufficiently attentive to Morris during the years at Merhavia. Would he have adjusted better to the kibbutz, physically and mentally, if she had spent more time with him and been less involved with the group as a whole? While she was attending to the needs of others in the kibbutz who had difficulty adjusting to the demands of daily life, she felt she had neglected her own husband. Golda Meir finally surmised that if she had thought deeply enough about her marriage or worried enough about it, she would have been more cognizant that Morris was struggling all alone to become acclimated to a way of life that was immensely difficult for him.²⁸

Golda Meir and Morris left the kibbutz and shortly thereafter had a son. Although she tried to adjust to being a "normal" wife and mother, Golda Meir could not overcome her desire for life at Merhavia. She greatly missed the friendships she had made and the sense of accomplishment derived from the work there. Golda Meir and her husband each blamed the other for the status of their relationship. It was because of her they had gone to Merhavia; but it was Morris' failure there that they had to leave. Neither, however, openly acknowledged their feelings regarding their situation.

When their son, Menahem, was six months old, Golda Meir returned to the kibbutz for a short time, hoping to recapture her sense of drive and optimism that was lacking in her life since she left to live in Jerusalem. The effort, however, was futile. She was not content without her husband.

Golda Meir recognized that she had to make a binding decision. In her autobiography she commented:

To put it bluntly, I had to decide which came first: my duty to my husband, my home and my child or the kind of life I myself really wanted. Not for the first time---and certainly not for the last---I realized that in a conflict between my duty and my innermost desires, it was my duty that had the prior claim. There was really no alternative other than to stop pining for a way of life that couldn't be mine, so I returned to Jerusalem--not without some foreboding, but determined to make a fresh start. I thought that if I tried very hard I would succeed.²⁹

Golda Meir spent four years trying to live up to her commitment. In 1926 she had a daughter and continued to try to be the wife and mother Morris wanted. For all her efforts and good intentions, she was unable to overcome the feelings of loneliness, or sense of isolation, and the sense of being deprived of the very activities for which she had moved to Palestine. Instead of helping to build the Jewish homeland, she was confined to a tiny apartment in Jerusalem trying to make a life on her husband's small salary.³⁰

In 1928 Golda Meir was offered the job as secretary of the Women's Labor Council of the Histadrut in Tel Aviv. This was a job that required considerable traveling. This opportunity forced her, again, to face the dilemma of abandoning her attempt to devote herself entirely to her family or pursue her personal goals. Although she had not given up all hope, Golda Meir realized that her marriage was a failure. She rationalized, however, that by returning to work and fulfilling her own needs, family life would be better for everyone and might preclude further decline of her marriage. Unfortunately, she was unable to salvage her marriage. Even so, she and Morris never divorced and, because of the children, remained a part of each other's lives until he died in 1951.

Golda Meir never regretted her decision to return to public life. She did deeply regret her inability to make a success of her marriage.³¹

RELATIONSHIP WITH HER CHILDREN.

Besides the remorse she felt regarding her failed marriage, Golda Meir was continually haunted by the fact that her devotion to her social/political duties took her away from her children, Menahem and Sarah. Not only was she confronted with her own self doubt about the impact of her life choices on her children, but she was charged by her mother and sister with depriving the children of proper care and attention. The activities viewed as courageous and self denying by outsiders met with little encouragement from Golda Meir's family. This made her inner struggle even more difficult. She made useless attempts to reconcile the instincts of a warm and caring woman with the need for action.³²

Golda Meir's internal conflict was probably best revealed in an article she contributed to a collection of memoirs called "The Plough Woman" written by a group of women pioneers in the Jewish community. An excerpt from that article follows:

Taken as a whole, the inner struggles and despairs of a mother who goes to work have few parallels. But within that whole there are many shades and variations. There are mothers who work only when they are forced to, when the husband is sick or unemployed or when the family has, in some other way, gone off the track of a normal life. In such cases the mother feels her course of action justified by necessity--her children would not be fed otherwise. But there is a type of woman who cannot remain home for other reasons. In spite of the place which her children take up in her life, her nature and being demand something more; she cannot divorce herself from a larger social life. She cannot let her children narrow her horizon. And for such a woman, there is no rest. ...But the mother also suffers in the very work she has taken up. Always she has the feeling that her work is not as productive as that of a man or even an unmarried woman. The children, too, always demand her, in health and even more in sickness. And this eternal inner division, this double pull, this alternating feeling of unfulfilled duty--today toward her family, the next day toward her work-- this is the burden of the working mother.³³

On another occasion Golda Meir commented that the worst thing for a working mother was when she enjoyed her work. A mother who worked only to be able to bring food to her children could be happy all her life. If, on the other hand, she enjoyed her work, then she felt guilty for leaving her children to enjoy herself.³⁴

In later years, public acclaim and notable significance of her work justified her devotion to the Jewish cause. At that stage of her life, however, the reproaches of her family contributed to self reproaches and questionings. If she could have remained in the kibbutz, Golda Meir would have been relieved of the domestic conflict since women in the kibbutz were required to participate in all activities. That framework allowed capable and idealistic women like her to take part in the rebuilding of Palestine at less personal cost.³⁵ The unfortunate reality was that she had been forced to leave the kibbutz because of the very conflict the kibbutz was designed to preclude.

In retirement, Golda Meir often reflected on those years when her children were growing up. Even in retrospect, she was unable to discern her real worth as a mother, neither through her own eyes nor the eyes of her children. Reminiscing about her children she stated: "I often wonder what they really have in their hearts? What do they feel toward me? Because there is no doubt I neglected them."³⁶

Although Golda Meir judged herself harshly regarding her relationship with her children, they did not share her views. Her son, Menahem Meir, while he admitted that he and his sister disliked their mother's frequent absences from home, she did not seem much different from the working mothers of their schoolmates. As an adult married to a working woman, Menahem expressed his appreciation for the tremendous burdens his mother shouldered during his childhood.

Golda Meir made up for the time spent away from her children by ensuring that whatever time she could devote to them was quality time. Menahem described her as attentive, kind, considerate,

and witty. Despite the many activities that competed for his mother's time, he remembered their home as being warm and well run.

Contrary to his mother's feelings, Menahem never felt second to her other interests nor did he feel neglected for the sake of her ego or personal advancement. Whenever she was going to be away from home, she always very carefully explained where she was going and why.³⁷

The episode that best demonstrated Golda Meir's concern for her children occurred in 1932 when Sarah became very ill. Unable to get effective medical care for Sarah in Tel Aviv, Golda Meir took both of her children to the United States in search of a cure for Sarah's misdiagnosed kidney ailment. During this time, Golda Meir demonstrated her characteristic flair for organization and ability to manage everything at once and cope with all the problems of relocation--arranging health care for Sarah; setting up a new household; starting a new job; and enrolling the children in school. One example of her commitment to ensure her children experienced a smooth transition into the American school, Golda Meir spent the entire first week of school sitting next to her children in a first grade classroom translating their lessons into Hebrew.³⁸

Golda Meir and her children spent two years in the United States in New York. To pay for Sarah's medical expenses and provide for the children in America, she agreed to work with the Pioneer Women, a sister organization in the United States of the Women's Labor Council. She traveled extensively making speeches and raising money to help settle new Jewish immigrants in Palestine.

As usual, her children disliked her long absences, but it was then that Menahem and Sarah began to understand the special role their mother played in establishing a Jewish homeland. They recognized how much everyone in the Jewish community sought their mother's views on everything from the ability of women to work as hard as men on farms to the number of Jews

Palestine could absorb annually. Menahem and Sarah realized that their mother was *not* like other mothers. She was a very strong and clever woman--a mother they were proud of.³⁹

THE YOM KIPPUR WAR

The greatest personal trial that Golda Meir faced began in October 1973, the Jewish Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur). On that day, Egypt and Syria launched a surprise attack on Israel as the Army and people prepared for the holiest day of the Jewish year.⁴⁰ Her military advisors had misjudged the situation and did not believe Israel would be attacked. If it were attacked, they believed there would be ample warning time during which the reserves could have been called up. Based on that advice, and against her own misgivings, Golda Meir failed to conduct a full scale call-up of the reserves to defend Israel. Although she was not considered directly responsible for the blunders that led to the inadequate preparedness of the Israeli Defense Force (IDF), she never recovered from what she described as "a nightmare that will always be with me."⁴¹

The war went on for several weeks. The IDF suffered staggering fatalities and other casualties. More than 2,500 Israelis were killed. One of the most terrible aspects of the fighting for Golda Meir was the fact that fighting was so intense that Israel was unable to account for many of the dead and wounded soldiers. Many, in fact, had to be left on the battlefield, a violation of one of Israel's most proud traditions.

Dealing with the casualties was particularly difficult because the number could have been reduced had Golda Meir decided on a pre-emptive strike after she learned about the eminent joint attack by Egypt and Syria. Her chief of staff recommended mobilization of the entire air force and

four divisions. The minister of defense advised calling up only two divisions, and argued that full mobilization would give the impression that Israel was the aggressor.

The decision on the degree of call-up and whether to launch a pre-emptive strike was left to Golda Meir. She agreed on the call-up recommended by the chief of staff, but even though she recognized the definite advantage of the pre-emptive strike, she decided against it. She feared that if Israel struck first and later needed external help, no one would provide it.⁴²

Although her decision resulted in the death of many Israeli soldiers, it did allow Israel to be able to appeal to the United States for help as Golda Meir had predicted might be the case. President Nixon responded to her request by providing an airlift of tanks, ammunition, clothing, medical supplies, Phantoms and Skyhawk jet fighters.⁴³

Even worse than dealing with the number of casualties, Golda Meir had to face the families of the missing soldiers with little or no information on their whereabouts or condition. There were times when she could hardly bring herself to complete the grim task.⁴⁴

As she later assessed the events that led up to the war, Golda Meir stated that she knew she should have listened to her heart and ordered the call-up. She had not followed her instincts because only a few months before (in May) she had alerted the reserves fearing an invasion. On that occasion, nothing happened. Other factors that deterred the call-up were the enormous monetary cost and the fact that her military advisors were less than sure war was imminent.

Golda Meir could not understand how she, a woman accustomed to making decisions, could have failed to make one so crucial. Because of that leadership error, she wrote, "I shall live with that terrible knowledge for the rest of my life. I will never again be the person I was before the Yom Kippur War."⁴⁵

Israel won the war militarily but the government lost the confidence of the people. The political leadership came under severe public criticism. The country was divided. Golda Meir faced lines of demonstrators bearing carrying placards stating "Golda go home."⁴⁶ The Israeli people were disgruntled over the lack of information regarding the dead and prisoners of war. Almost daily the bodies of Israeli soldiers were found in the desert sand and brought to burial. Worst of all, all sections of the population demanded the government resign. The charge was that the lack of military readiness at the start of the war was due to complacency and lack of communication between the government and the people of Israel.

The demands for change came from not only the general population but from reservists. Golda Meir disagreed with some of the charges about the past, but agreed that some of their criticisms were justified. Regardless, she felt compelled to meet with them and hear their concerns. They demanded change; not just the resignation of Golda Meir and the minister of defense, but the resignation of everyone who could have been responsible for the tragedy that took place. They demanded leadership by new and younger people who were not tainted by the events of the war.⁴⁷

The country was so divided that, when new elections were held in December 1973, Golda Meir's Labor Party failed to get enough votes to form a majority government. She, instead, through extensive bargaining and persuasion, formed a coalition government.⁴⁸ Through a great deal of effort, she managed to provide enough stability during the political turbulence to hold the country together.

In the years following the crisis, Golda Meir was often asked if she could have conceivably responded differently to the crisis. Her response in her memoirs answered the question and revealed the anguish she suffered as a result of her decision:

...I know what I should have done. ...That Friday morning I should have listened to the warnings of my own heart and ordered a call-up. For me, that fact can never be erased and never will be erased, and there can be no consolation in anything that anyone else has to say or in all the common sense rationalizations with which my colleagues have tried to comfort me.⁴⁹

On June 4, 1974, Golda Meir retired, worn by all the years of service to the Jewish homeland and in response to the wishes of the people for new political leadership.

CONCLUSION

I can honestly say that I was never affected by the question of the success of an undertaking. If I felt it was the right thing to do, I was for it regardless of the possible outcome.

Golda Meir

Throughout her life, every decision Golda Meir made was based on a higher calling to do the right thing; to do that which was best for Jews around the world. From her childhood aspirations to be a teacher, to her role as party leader and prime minister, she was always driven by the hope that there would be some intellectual or social benefit derived from her activities.

Involvement in national and political activities to ensure a better life for Jews, and to build a Jewish homeland, were her life's blood--"an absolute necessity." Golda Meir, like many great leaders dedicated to selfless service, continually faced tough choices between responsibilities to personal relationships and duty to country.

Given the choices, she experienced more inner peace when she worked toward building a place where Jews were in charge of their own destiny and securing that place for the future. Even so, the less stoic part of her was haunted by personal conscience. The following quotation better

summarizes Golda Meir's feelings about herself, and reflects the omnipresent dilemma between who she was and who she thought she should be:

Show me the sensible person who likes himself or herself!
I know myself too well to like what I see. I know but too well
that I'm not what I'd like to be.

Golda Meir

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