



Wondrous Golda and Another Story

Ephraim Keshon

In these dark days when our very own Prime Minister is waging a personal rear-guard battle on the fields of Washington, when President Nixon is full of reproach and his Secretary of State feigns anger, when Commander Sadat still won't decide on the meaning of "year of decision," we should stop for a moment to acknowledge that we have more luck in having Golda than in anything else. Just two and a half years ago the leadership of her splintered party rescued her from oblivion as a compromise, and the whole country—including this writer—cried out against the misfortune wrought from above. How, for God's sake, we asked, can they hang around the neck of this young and vigorous people a tired, crafty old woman, a bureaucrat whose time has passed?

How, for God's sake, could they commit such a colossal error?

Today we cannot look at her without emotion, as she slowly waddles toward the airplane. Ms. Meir's eyes look troubled, though she herself, it seems, is never tired. She is apparently younger and more vigorous than any of us. A supernatural phenomenon. And still more wonderful, she remains unflappable even when dealing with the coalition. The only time she seems at all perturbed is in her own kitchen. She is so strong that at a funeral she can allow herself to cry right into the cameras. Her nasal Hebrew has become for us a sweet melody. She has white hair. It is a love affair—that's all one can say.

More than once it has been said of her: Had she not existed we would have had to invent her. But no one could think her up, not even with wildest imagination. A head of state with a shopping bag? A flying grandmother?

She is now seventy-three years old. Again she is deeply entrenched in her original position, facing this smiling American—whose friendship for our

country is each day calculated by a computer—President Nixon, who can in no way understand why this thankless woman besets him with such dangerous situations, why she won't pull back already to the borders and retire to her grandchildren.

Indeed, what could convince the man? He will never grasp the fact that in front of our door stands a large and nervous army, a traveling exhibition of the Soviet weapons industry, whose leader announces every single morning that in another five seconds the fateful attack will begin, that the bombers will take off and the artillery will move into action and won't retreat—but in spite of it all the foe sits in utter quiet, and the Jews come home from the movies and sleep the sleep of children. In the morning they get up and quarrel with each other about the silliest damned things, because the doorstep is now seven hundred kilometers left of Mugraby Square, beyond the desert and beyond the sea and beyond debate. . . .

President Nixon would never acknowledge to Golda's face that her refusal to withdraw, which threatens to bring a new outbreak of war, is the very thing that is preventing the war. And were the Egyptian commander to mass his forces at the secure and agreed-upon boundaries of '67, the people of Israel would long since have been fully mobilized and equipped and have marched into the last battle—instead of into the second showing. The good President will never grasp the fact that Golda knows what he knows—that Sadat sincerely wants peace and cannot tolerate the Russians. But tomorrow—begging your pardon!—the man may be riddled with bullets as he is entering the Sheraton Hotel and Qaddafi the Prattler may take over and declare a holy war from within shelling range of Tel Aviv. . . .

There is practically no hope of explaining this to masters of global strategy—or whatever they call it—and we must not be angry at them for being angry at us. After all, didn't Chamberlain also dislike the Czechs? There is only one argument that will convince our friends: a clear and resounding NO. Without true peace, not one step; in exchange for true peace, almost anything. In the meantime, let the deluge come—NO! You may say that Jews are abnormal, suspicious, unyielding—still NO! This time Czechoslovakia says no.

And all of these unpleasant things, which one must not say out loud, she must tell them.

To be sure, one shouldn't envy Nixon either. How can he stand up to this stubborn grandmother with the brown, accusing eyes? He can't even raise his voice to her. She is liable to break into tears, and he won't know whether she is just acting or really means it:

"Madame," the President will plead with her, "you know I promised President Sadat that I would not supply Phantoms as long as quiet prevails along the Canal, so what do you want from me?"

"Phantoms. To *keep* it quiet along the Canal."

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Besides everything else, she can get upset in excellent English. She is on familiar ground, and she knows Nixon. She has no desire to be reelected. Her only ambition is to leave behind her borders that will not force us to go to war every ten years. Now she is surrounded by newspaper sharks and State Department fireflies, this whole bustling menagerie of the exalted international circus that takes not even a moment's intermission. How does she stand up under such an impossible load? Where does she get the spiritual and physical strength at her age? God knows, perhaps. We can only wave to her from here across the ocean. And tell her that we love her.

Another Story

All sorts of claims can be leveled against the Establishment, one can take issue with it quite intelligently, but no one can doubt our government's deep sympathy for the Jews of the Soviet Union. Our public officials take not a step without first considering our brothers in Russia, and hidden behind every decision is always a concern for their fate.

Take, for example, the new regulations raising taxes on all baby carriages manufactured since 1953. The government economists had already agreed to fix the tax at 11 per cent of the price (give or take less than a per cent per year), when the Commissioner of Revenue stood up and said:

"Dear friends, think for just a moment, if you will, of the Jews in Russia. When the immigrants come from that country they will, of course, be provided with old-model baby carriages. And when they realize that we are collecting virtually no taxes on their humble vehicles they will argue, and rightly so: 'Are we not Jews? Are we inferior to our brothers in Israel that you do not collect taxes from us at the same rate as from the rest of the population? Are we lepers, or perhaps our carriages are not carriages?' Now *you* may go and tell these good Jews that their carriages are last year's models if you want to, but I myself could not do it."

The government economists assented. The tax on baby carriages was set at 58 per cent, retroactive to the previous year.

Or take the problem of the sanctity of smoking. As you know, two weeks ago the district court granted the petition of a baker from Jaffa, one Dovi Shtoksham, who requested a ruling on whether or not he is permitted to smoke in the bathroom on the Sabbath. The judge ruled that, since there is no clear prohibition in the Declaration of Independence, the petitioner is permitted to smoke within his own house to his heart's content "as long as he does not open any windows."

The Minister of Justice quickly prepared a legislative compromise, settling the crisis in the spirit of

rabbinic tradition: "It is forbidden for any citizen or temporary resident, with the exception of Shtoksham, Dovi, to smoke on the Sabbath or festivals, either before or after them, in his house or in any other place, and always."

The left-wing factions in the Knesset raised a surprising objection to the compromise, arguing that it would be difficult to enforce the law without violating the sanctity of the Sabbath. Then the Minister of Justice stood up and bitingly denounced his colleagues:

"That's all very nice, honored Knesset, but what will our brothers, the Russian Jews, say when they come? 'Why have we come?' they will say. 'In Russia we smoked on the Sabbath, and now look—in Israel we may also smoke on the Sabbath! If there is no difference between the two countries, we might as well have stayed quietly among the Gentiles! And they will return to the diaspora as one man, just as they came! Is this what you want, honored colleagues?'"

No, this was the very last thing they wanted. Not only was the bill passed into law, but the tax on cigarettes was raised by 33 per cent. And in the very same session it was decided to establish five additional government ministries for the six new ministers who had been chosen by lottery.

"First and foremost at times like this," said the Prime Minister, "I think of the Russian Jews. They will say to themselves when they come, 'The Soviet Union, that enemy of Zion, has fourteen government ministries. So shouldn't the homeland of our fathers, the holy land of Israel, have at least twice as many? Are Gentiles permitted to have more than the Chosen People?' Friends, we must not disappoint our brothers."

And so we have thirty-two ministries, and four more on the drawing boards. But all these steps were but a prelude to the wondrous event that took place only a few nights ago at the Ministry of the Treasury in the capital city. A few senior civil servants sat in the Minister's office and discussed the suffering of the Russian immigrants when they arrive.

"They have landed at the airport confused and helpless, for their language is foreign, their notions of things are different, and their wives are not Jewish. They've been sitting in the waiting room without making a sound, alone and shut off. Only their eyes silently implore: 'Brothers, help us. . . .'"

The Minister of the Treasury rose quickly and went into the next room. When he emerged a short time later his eyes were red.

"Gentlemen," he said quietly, "I am increasing the stamp tax on bill collections by one and a half per cent. . . ."

Milk will also get more expensive because of Tevya and his seven daughters. Everything for them, everything.

(Translated by Larry Edwards)