

## David Ben-Gurion A Gordian Knot Lesson Plan

### Central Historical Question: What was the Gordian knot?

#### Materials:

- Gordian Knot PowerPoint
- *Gordian Knot* Video
- Copies of *Documents A-G*.

#### Plan of Instruction:

*The PowerPoint, video and supporting documents reinforce lesson content through purposeful repetition and the gradual addition of new material.*

1. Pass out Documents A-G.
2. Mini-lecture with PowerPoint:
  - Slide: A Gordian Knot: an intricate problem; especially a problem insoluble in its own terms.
  - Slide: Zionist Leader: *By 1935, David Ben-Gurion is head of Mapai, the unified party of Labor, chairman of the Zionist Executive, and head of the Jewish Agency. Despite wielding the authority of which he had dreamed, he finds his freedom of action sharply curtailed due to events that create a Gordian knot he has no way to untie.*
  - Slide: Nazi Germany. *Ben-Gurion is quick to understand the greatest threat. In 1933, the year Hitler assumes power, Ben-Gurion tells the Zionist Congress: "Hitler's rule places the entire Jewish people in jeopardy. His regime cannot continue long without war. What will be our strength and weight in Palestine on the awful judgment day, when the great catastrophe bursts upon the world? Who knows — perhaps only four or five years stand between us and that terrible day."*
  - Slide: Refugees to Eretz Israel: *With Jews fleeing Nazi Germany, Ben-Gurion emphasizes the need to increase immigration to Eretz Israel, especially as he is sure war is coming. Ben-Gurion proposes a worldwide campaign to demand Britain assist in the immigration and absorption of a million Jews. He says, "During this period we must double our numbers for the size of the Jewish community then may determine our fate in that decisive hour." Jewish refugees from Hitler pour into Palestine. In 1935, an unprecedented 65,000 Jews arrive from Germany, more than in the previous twelve years combined. Jews flee other countries as well, including Poland, Hungary and Romania. With severe immigration quotas*

- in other countries, approximately one-third of those who flee will make it to Palestine.*
- Slide: Arab Revolt: *The flow of Jews into Palestine sparks a violent reaction from the Arabs, who riot in 1936, attacking Jews and British alike. Haj Amin al-Husseini, the Mufti of Jerusalem, who will go on to collaborate with Hitler in World War II, orchestrates the riots. He calls in a famous Turkish-Syrian officer, Fawzi al-Kaukji, to lead guerrilla fighters pouring in from Syria and Iraq.*
  - Slide: Havlagah: *During these attacks, Ben-Gurion insists on a policy of “havlagah,” or self-restraint. It means Jews will defend themselves when attacked but won’t go on the offensive. Ben-Gurion fears that if Jews do so they will lose British support. As one historian explains: “There was one basic assumption from which he did not budge: the Jewish community must not come into conflict with Britain. Britain was the only force capable of helping the Jewish community by continuing the active implementation of the ‘National Home’ policy. Thus it was incumbent upon the Jewish community to do everything in its power to preserve British sympathy.”*
  - Slide: Tensions at the Top: *Britain establishes a Royal Commission to investigate the violence. It arrives in Palestine in November 1936. Weizmann, as president of the World Zionist Organization, gives strong testimony in his public remarks before the Commission. But in his private testimony, he gives vague answers on immigration. He undermines Ben-Gurion’s call for mass immigration, telling the Commission that it would take 25-30 years to absorb that million – this at a time when Europe’s Jews were in grave danger. Ben-Gurion is furious. As one historian writes, “Weizmann had disavowed all the plans for a large-scale immigration and the creation of a Jewish majority.” Ben-Gurion is now convinced Weizmann can’t be trusted in negotiations.*
  - Slide: Gordian Knot: *But it’s soon clear that it doesn’t matter what any Jewish leader says. With the Nazi menace on the horizon and war looming, Britain is only concerned with satisfying Muslims in the Middle East and India, the backyard of Britain’s Empire. Satisfying Jewish demands doesn’t matter, as the British understand that the Jews have no choice but to side with Britain. As Ben-Gurion says: “Satan himself couldn’t have come up with a more oppressive and menacing nightmare. They’ve got us locked up and silenced... It is inconceivable that the Jews will be on Hitler’s side. Not so the Arabs. They have to be bought, because they can [afford to] be on Hitler’s side.”*

- Slide: The Knot Tightens: *In May, 1939, Britain caves to Arab demands. The British issue a White Paper that limits and then effectively cuts off Jewish immigration after five years. It also restricts land sales, prohibiting Jews from acquiring farm land outside the urban centers. The White Paper also declares that Britain has fulfilled its obligation to the Jews under the Balfour Declaration. In fact, the White Paper does the opposite. Its purpose is to put a stop to the Jewish National Home.*
- Slide: 'Fighting Zionism': *In response to the White Paper, Ben-Gurion issues a statement on behalf of the Jewish Agency: "It is a policy in which the Jewish people will not acquiesce ... Such a regime can only be established and maintained by force. ... It seems only too probable that the Jews will have to fight rather than submit to Arab rule." Ben-Gurion calls his militant brand of Zionism: 'Fighting Zionism.' At the center of his plan is illegal immigration -- smuggling in refugees fleeing Europe, with armed defense of the immigrants as they come ashore. He also prepares for civil disobedience, including a tax rebellion and other nonviolent methods of resistance. He meets with the Haganah, the underground defense group under his control. His colleagues, however, are frightened by Ben-Gurion's militant Zionism. As a historian notes: "every time he made such a proposal to the Zionist Executive or the Mapai Central Committee – even to the Haganah National Command – his colleagues headed him off, rejecting his proposals out of hand. They saw no point in making relations with the government worse at a time when the Yishuv was dependent on the British and the prospect of war was in the air. Ben-Gurion's "fighting Zionism" was another of the man's volcanic eruptions his colleagues managed to block."*
- Slide: World War II: *World War II breaks out in September 1939 with Germany's invasion of Poland.*
- Slide: Ben-Gurion's Formula: *When World War II breaks out in September 1939, Ben-Gurion faces a dilemma: How to fight British policy and at the same time help Britain defeat Hitler? He comes up with a famous formula: "We must help the British in their war against Hitler as though there were no White Paper, and we must resist the White Paper as though there were no war!" In fact, only the first part of Ben-Gurion's formula is implemented during the war; fighting Hitler. When Ben Gurion issues a call to arms 130,000 Jewish men and women descend on recruiting centers.*
- Slide: Biltmore Conference: *The effort to defeat the White Paper takes the shape of speeches and resolutions and morphs into a plan for the war's aftermath. In May, 1942 in New York City Ben-Gurion addresses the Pan American Zionist Conference, better known as the Biltmore Conference,*

*where the delegates reject the White Paper, and demand that the Jewish Agency be given control of immigration and that Palestine be established as a Jewish commonwealth.*

- Slide: Holocaust: *As knowledge of the Holocaust reaches the outside world, Ben-Gurion becomes despondent. He tells the Jewish Agency Executive: "The extermination of European Jewry means the end of Zionism for there will be no one to build Palestine."*
- Slide: Renewed Mission: *By 1943, Ben-Gurion has regained some of his optimism. He tells the Mapai Central Committee in December that the catastrophe will make the world understand that the Jews need a state. "The Zionist case rests not merely on the reality we have created here thus far, but also on the reality of the Jewish catastrophe. The world must be made to see this." Ben-Gurion's optimism extends to Britain, which he believes will change its policy after the war. In 1944, he urges the Jewish community in Palestine to turn in members of the underground Irgun, which has declared a revolt against the British. "The Jewish community is called upon to spew forth all the members of this harmful, destructive gang, to wipe out the organization, for this is a matter of life or death," he says.*
- Slide: Gordian Knot Undone: *In 1945, although the Nazis are defeated, Ben-Gurion is mistaken about a change in British policy. A new Labor government, which has promised to help the Zionists, continues the policy of the last administration. But with the Nazis destroyed, the Gordian knot has been untied. And in the aftermath of the Holocaust, there is world sympathy for the Jews. Now only the British stand in the way. And Ben-Gurion intends to take them on.*

### 3. Play video: A Gordian Knot

Introduce inquiry question: What was the Gordian knot?

### 4. Whole class discussion:

- In the May 1939 White Paper, the British declare the Balfour Declaration fulfilled and then essentially turn over Palestine to Arab control. Why did the British ignore this glaring contradiction?
- Ben-Gurion wanted to combat the White Paper with an aggressive 'Fighting Zionism' program. His colleagues disagreed. Who do you think was right?
- The Biltmore Program is considered important because the Zionists for the first time openly stated their goal of a Jewish State. Vladimir Jabotinsky, who died in 1940, had argued that they should they

have been stating this goal all along. Would declaring their goal earlier have helped, and if so, how?

- In Ben-Gurion's double formula only the part about fighting the Nazis was really implemented. Should the Zionists have done more to fight the British during the war?
- The British still maintain an anti-Zionist policy even after the war. What do you think Ben-Gurion's options are at this point?

5. Hand out Review Questions (may be used as end of class Quiz).

**Document A: “Ben-Gurion: Prophet of Fire”, Dan Kurzman (1983)**

Ben-Gurion envisaged days of catastrophe for his people – unless they could escape to *Eretz Yisrael*. On one trip home, at a meeting of the Histadrut Council, he prophesied:

Hitler’s rule places the entire Jewish people in jeopardy. ... [His] regime cannot long continue without war, a war of vengeance against France, Poland, Czechoslovakia and other countries where a German population is to be found, or against Soviet Russia with its vast expanses. ... What will be our strength and weight in [Palestine] on the awful judgment day, when the great catastrophe bursts upon the world? Who knows – perhaps only four or five years ... stand between us and that terrible day. During this period we must double our numbers, for the size of the Jewish community then may determine our fate in that decisive hour.

*Source: Ben-Gurion: Prophet of Fire, Dan Kurzman, Simon & Schuster, New York, 1983, p. 189.*

**Document B: “Ben-Gurion: Prophet of Fire”, Dan Kurzman (1983)**

The first Arab bullets tore through the night of April 15, 1936, ripping into two Jews on the Tulkarm-Nablus road and setting off a chain reaction of violence in the dark twisting alleys of several towns. Four days later, Arab bands thundering over the cobblestones of Jaffa wantonly knifed and shot sixteen Jews to death. Were these attacks simply a spate of common Arab street crimes? Though many Jewish leaders thought they were, Ben-Gurion was doubtful. Even if the murders had been spontaneous up to now, the mufti and his men would surely exploit them to spark others. The crimes had made the Palestine Arabs look odious to the world anyway, so why not seize this opportunity to detonate a full-scale rebellion?

Ben-Gurion’s suspicion proved well-founded. The *effendis* called a general strike on April 22 and formed a Supreme Arab Committee, which voted to close down shops, factories and ports until the British stopped Jewish immigration, banned land sales to Jews, and formed an Arab-majority government. The aim of the strike was to fuel new violence, and it did. Palestine exploded into a battleground with Arabs, daggers raised, guns drawn, attacking Jews and Britons alike and even uprooting trees that Jews had planted on barren land. Had the great bloodbath begun? ...

He ordered Hagana fighters to open their hidden caches and remove the new greased rifles they had stolen from the British or smuggled in from abroad. But they must remember that their job was to defend, not to kill indiscriminately. They must be guided by one word: *havlaga*, “self-restraint.” No Jew was to let the smell of blood go to his head. The Jew was to be the purest fighter in the world, for he was defending a people destined to purify the human spirit.

“Terrorism benefits the Arabs,” he wrote. “It may lay waste the *Yishuv* and shake Zionism. But to follow in the Arabs’ footsteps and ape their deeds is to be blind to the gulf between us.”

Besides, there was now a practical side to *havlaga*. The Jews had to win the sympathy of Britain no matter how some mandate officials

felt. The British, it seemed, bore gifts for everyone. With one hand they were giving the Arabs concessions, but with the other they were giving the Jews at least some arms and military training, and this aid must not be jeopardized. The British represented a last-ditch security barrier against Arab mobs threatening to massacre the Jews, and any Jewish attacks might weaken this barrier. The Yishuv couldn't take the risk.

**Vocabulary**

Effendi: a man of high education or social standing in an eastern Mediterranean or Arab country.

*Source: Ben-Gurion: Prophet of Fire, Dan Kurzman, Simon & Schuster, New York, 1983, p. 209-210.*

**Document C: “Ben-Gurion: A Biography”, Michael Bar-Zohar (1977)**

In November 1936, one of Ben-Gurion’s growing fears was realized: a Royal Commission of Inquiry, headed by Lord Peel, appeared in Palestine. Memories of the Shaw Commission destroyed Ben-Gurion’s peace of mind. Together with Moshe Sharett, Chaim Weizmann, and their close colleagues, Ben-Gurion took part in meetings to work out the principal outlines of the Jewish case and divide the burden of testimony. The rivalry between Weizmann and Ben-Gurion found its expression here as well. The moment it was decided that Weizmann would present the Zionist political case, Ben-Gurion decided that he himself would not appear before the commission, sensing that he would be put in the shade of Weizmann’s natural authority, proud appearance, and rhetorical ability.

At first this seemed like a sensible decision. Weizmann gave his public testimony before the commission in a wonderfully brave and powerful speech, and Ben-Gurion was full of admiration. “Chaim has once more regained his position within the Jewish people,” he wrote in his journal, “and there is no doubt that his words will unite the movement as it has not been united for many years.” A few days later, however, Ben-Gurion again became fiercely critical. After his public appearance, Weizmann gave the rest of his testimony *in camera*. When the text of his statement reached Ben-Gurion, he was seized with anger. Weizmann had given dangerously vague answers to the question of immigration. At a closed consultation with a few of his colleagues, Ben-Gurion expressed the opinion that Weizmann “must not be permitted to testify *in camera*. He is very powerful when he attacks, and when he is the sole speaker. In an argument, he is helpless.”

As Weizmann continued his testimony, Ben-Gurion fumed, “This testimony is, in my opinion, a political catastrophe.” Indeed, when speaking of the dangers looming over six million European Jews, Weizmann pointed out that only two million could be rescued – one million would come to Palestine, and another million would emigrate to other countries. When asked how long it would take to bring a

million Jews into Palestine and absorb them, Weizmann replied, “Twenty-five or thirty years, it’s hard to say.” He also hinted that the immigration of that million might satisfy the demands of the Zionist movement. He wanted the immigration plan to be carried out as quickly as possible, “but we must be aware that, if we go too fast, we may break our necks”.

Ben-Gurion’s fury was justified. In one blow, Weizmann had disavowed all the plans for a large-scale immigration and the creation of a Jewish majority. Instead, he had depicted Zionist objectives as nothing more than the immigration and absorption of one million Jews to reach western Palestine in the course of thirty years! Ben-Gurion sent Weizmann his resignation as head of the Jewish Agency’s Political Department, stating, “After long and bitter reflection, it became clear to me that in questions of Zionist policy, my ideas do not coincide with yours...” The letter left a profound impact on Weizmann, and at the initiative of those close to him, a meeting was arranged with Ben-Gurion. The result was that Ben-Gurion withdrew his resignation and a week later he also testified before the Royal Commission

Source: *Ben-Gurion: A Biography*, Michael Bar-Zohar, Adama Books, New York, 1977, p. 89-90.

**Document D: “Ben-Gurion: The Burning Ground”,  
Shabtai Teveth (1987)**

Publication of the White Paper on May 17, 1939 came as no surprise to Ben-Gurion and his JAE [Jewish Agency Executive] colleagues. ...

The first part of the White Paper said that the British Government had lived up to its obligation to the Jewish people and the National Home, evidenced by the fact that its “population has risen to some 450,000, or approaching a third of the entire population of the country.” As soon as peace and order were restored the transitional period, during which Palestine would remain under British rule, would begin. At the end of five years, “an appropriate body representative of the people of Palestine and of His Majesty’s Government will be set up to ... consider and make recommendations regarding the Constitution of the independent Palestine State,” which would safeguard the holy places, the rights of the Jewish minority, and Britain’s foreign relations and strategic interests. His Majesty’s government would “do everything in their power to create conditions which will enable the independent Palestine State to come into being within ten years.”

The second part of the White Paper dealt with immigration during the transitional period. The Yishuv would be permitted to increase to approximately one third of the total population – 75,000 Jewish immigrants would be admitted. For each of the first five years, 10,000 would be allowed. Additionally, “as a contribution toward the solution of the Jewish refugee problem, 25,000 refugees will be admitted” above the cumulated yearly totals. However, if any Jewish immigrants entered the country “illegally” their number would be deducted from the yearly quotas. Further, the totals were subject to the criterion of economic absorptive capacity, determination of which was to be the ultimate responsibility of the high commissioner. After the period of five years, no further Jewish immigration would be permitted unless the Arabs of Palestine were prepared “to acquiesce in it.”

Finally, the third part, which dealt with land, decreed, “There is now in certain areas no room for further transfers of Arab land [to Jews].” The high commissioner was to be given “general powers to prohibit and regulate transfers of land. These powers will date from the

publication of this Statement of Policy and the High Commissioner will retain them throughout the transitional period.” When, on February 22, 1940, the Land Transfer Regulations were published, Palestine was divided into three zones. The ban on Jewish land acquisition covered all of Samaria and large parts of the Gaza and Beersheva regions. The second zone, in which sales were permitted by authorization of the high commissioner, included the Jezreel Valley and the Galilee, part of the coastal plain, and the southern Negev. Most of the coastal plain, the Haifa district, and other urban areas made up a third zone – only 5 percent of Palestine’s area – in which Jews were free to buy land from the Arabs.

*Source: Ben-Gurion The Burning Ground 1886-1948, Shabtai Teveth, Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston 1987, p. 711-713.*

**Document E: “Ben-Gurion: Father of Modern Israel”,  
Anita Shapira (2014)**

Between March and September 1939, Ben-Gurion was in a frenzy. He worked unceasingly to mobilize the Yishuv for a real physical struggle against the White Paper. He proposed mass immigration with armed defense of the immigrants as they came ashore, settlement without government approval, and significant reinforcement of Haganah units. He was prepared for armed clashes with British government forces. These activist notions were intended as an antidote to the Jews' sense of complete helplessness, which heightened as the specter of a world war drew ever closer. However, every time he made such a proposal to the Zionist Executive or the Mapai Central Committee – even to the Haganah National Command – his colleagues headed him off, rejecting his proposals out of hand. They saw no point in making relations with the government worse at a time when the Yishuv was dependent on the British and the prospect of war was in the air. Ben-Gurion's “fighting Zionism” was another of the man's volcanic eruptions his colleagues managed to block.

*Source: Ben-Gurion: Father of Modern Israel, Anita Shapira, Yale University Press, New Haven, 2014, p. 114-115*

**Document F: “Ben-Gurion: The Burning Ground”,  
Shabtai Teveth (1987)**

Ben-Gurion again had to find a double-formula. But this time it was not easy to devise. At a Political Committee meeting on April 5 [1939], and again before the Central Committee on May 28, he reiterated. “We shall not fight England,” but otherwise kept going around in circles, not finding the redeeming epigram. At the Zionist Congress, convened in Geneva in an atmosphere of imminent war, during deliberation on the battle against the White Paper, he was still groping, although getting closer to his target. “Perhaps tomorrow or the day after the lot will fall and the decision will come in blood and fire – and with this decision we shall stand beside England. But we shall not conceal or make indistinct ... that on Palestine’s political front we have a grave and tragic quarrel ... We shall not give in or shrink a hairsbreadth.” Only when the war broke out did he find what he needed. On September 12, 1939, he fired off his most famous epigram. To Mapai’s Central Committee he said, “We must support the [British] army as though there were no White Paper, and fight the White Paper as though there were no war.” A week later, in the JAE, he broadened this formula. “[We must] offer England all possible support. To the extent that the White Paper materializes we shall fight it as though there were no war in the world.” In December Ben-Gurion explained to the Small Actions Committee,

The war forces us to double our considerations; on one hand we must consider the White Paper, on the other, the war ... This double accounting is ... a difficulty without equal, but we must accept it, since if we take only the war into consideration we shall deny the hopes of the Jewish people. If we consider only the White Paper and block out the war, we deny all, both the hopes of the Jewish people and of humanity. ... We have been confronted ... from the start of the war with a tragic situation that has no equal. While with all our hearts and our souls we sided with England and France against the most terrifying enemy ever to rise against the Jewish people ... the state which leads the war against Hitler regretfully proclaimed war against the hopes of the Jewish people. This spiritual

conflict has also become a great political entanglement for us since the outbreak of this war.

Ben-Gurion's colleagues seem to have repeated and polished his formula, and in the way a folk song or proverb is created, the famous version emerged: "War against Hitler as though there were no White Paper, and war against the White Paper as though there were no Hitler." Ben-Gurion ultimately made this version his own. An official notice published by the JAE in May 1940 included the slogan "War against the Nazis as though there were no White Paper; war against the White Paper as though there were no war against the Nazis."

*Source: Ben-Gurion The Burning Ground 1886-1948, Shabtai Teveth, Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston 1987, p. 717-718.*

**Document G: “Biltmore Conference Declaration  
Excerpts” (1942)**

The Conference calls for the fulfillment of the original purpose of the Balfour Declaration and the Mandate which recognizing “the historical connection of the Jewish people with Palestine” was to afford them the opportunity, as stated by President Wilson, to found there a Jewish Commonwealth. The Conference affirms its unalterable rejection of the White Paper of May 1939 and denies its moral or legal validity. The White Paper seeks to limit, and in fact to nullify Jewish rights to immigration and settlement in Palestine, and, as stated by Mr. Winston Churchill in the House of Commons in May 1939, constitutes “a breach and repudiation of the Balfour Declaration”. The policy of the White Paper is cruel and indefensible in its denial of sanctuary to Jews fleeing from Nazi persecution; and at a time when Palestine has become a focal point in the war front of the United Nations, and Palestine Jewry must provide all available manpower for farm and factory and camp, it is in direct conflict with the interests of the allied war effort. ...

The Conference declares that the new world order that will follow victory cannot be established on foundations of peace, justice and equality, unless the problem of Jewish homelessness is finally solved. The Conference urges that the gates of Palestine be opened; that the Jewish Agency be vested with control of immigration into Palestine and with the necessary authority for upbuilding the country, including the development of its unoccupied and uncultivated lands; and that Palestine be established as a Jewish Commonwealth integrated in the structure of the new democratic world.

Then and only then will the age old wrong to the Jewish people be righted.

*Source: Jewish Virtual Library: <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/the-biltmore-conference-1942>.*

**Guiding Questions**

**Name** \_\_\_\_\_

1. Why does Ben-Gurion advocate *Havlaga* (“self-restraint”)?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
2. Ben-Gurion advocates *Havlaga* (“self-restraint”), to maintain British support, and then ‘*Fighting Zionism*’ to defy the British. Why did Ben-Gurion pursue such different policies?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
3. Why didn’t ‘Fighting Zionism’ get off the ground?

In the space below answer the following: *What is the Gordian knot?*