

## David Ben-Gurion *Freedom of Action* Lesson Plan

**Central Historical Question: What were Ben-Gurion's main contributions as prime minister?**

### Materials:

- Freedom of Action PowerPoint
- *Freedom of Action* Video
- Copies of *Documents A-I*.

### 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-I.
2. Mini-lecture with PowerPoint:
  - Slide: At the Summit: *At the 22<sup>nd</sup> Zionist congress in Basel, Switzerland in 1946, Ben-Gurion is re-elected head of the Zionism Executive and the Jewish Agency. His rival, Chaim Weizmann, is not re-elected World Zionist Organization president. It marks a victory for Ben-Gurion who had advocated a more activist approach at the conference and the immediate creation of a Jewish state as opposed to the more moderate, go-slow approach of Weizmann. With Weizmann out of the way, Ben-Gurion stands alone at the Zionist summit.*
  - Slide: Preparations for War: *Ben-Gurion takes the defense portfolio at the 22<sup>nd</sup> Zionist Congress. He asks for \$3 million for defense spending and devotes his energies to studying and preparing for what he recognizes as inevitable invasion by the Arab states. Already in 1945, he has met with a group of American-Jewish industrialists in New York and told them he will need military supplies. America had already started selling its World War II surplus. This group, called the Sonneborn Institute, after its head Rudolf Sonneborn, will play an important part in arming the new Jewish state.*
  - Slide: Illegal Immigration: *Despite the end of World War II, Britain refuses to change its immigration policy in Palestine. Millions of Holocaust survivors are trapped in Displaced Persons, or DP, camps in Europe. Ben-Gurion visits these camps and promises that a Jewish state will be created and will take them in. He organizes large-scale illegal immigration to raise world sympathy. The campaign is effective. The world watches as British troops seize survivors on the shores of Palestine. The most famous of the illegal immigrant ships is the Exodus. In the summer of 1947, the British*

- capture the ship off shore and send the Jews on board back to Germany. Sending Jews back to the country that had attempted to murder them becomes a major public relations disaster for Britain. The illegal immigration campaign combined with the actions of the underground Irgun and LEHI, eventually forces Britain to throw in the towel.*
- *Slide: Britain Prepares to Leave: On September 26th, 1947, Britain announces its intention to leave Palestine. Two months later, on November 29, 1947, over two-thirds of the United Nations votes in favor of General Assembly Resolution 181 proposing a partition of Palestine: 56% to be assigned to a Jewish state and 43% to an Arab state. Jerusalem is to fall under international administration. Britain picks the date of May 15, 1948 as the day of its departure.*
  - *Slide: Arab Guerrilla Forces: Less than 24 hours after the November 27 UN vote, Arab guerrillas open fire on a bus outside Jerusalem, killing 7 Jews. This marks the start of the War before the War in which Arab irregular forces attack Jewish settlements and cut communication lines. Arab volunteers flood in from the north. They call themselves the Arab Liberation Army and are led by Syrian Officer Fawzi al-Kaukji, who had led Arab guerrillas in the 1936 Arab revolt. Another force controlled by the Mufti of Jerusalem, Haj Amin al-Husseini, called the Army of the Holy War, operates in the center of the country. Britain does nothing to interfere with the Arab guerrilla forces but it does interfere with Jewish forces.*
  - *Slide: Rallying the Troops: Arab successes throw a scare into UN member states, including the U.S., who had supported partition. They now wonder about the wisdom of supporting a Jewish state when it seems that it will be wiped out by the Arabs. As international support weakens, doubts begin to grow within the Zionist leadership. As the date of the British withdrawal approaches, doubts increase as news comes of the fall of Kfar Etzion, a village near Jerusalem, to the Arab Legion. It's a massacre: 157 Jews are murdered and only four survive. They also learn of Egypt's attack on Kfar Darom in the South. But Ben-Gurion is adamant a state must be declared without further delay. He rallies members of his Mapai party and afterwards the 13-member Provisional Government, which votes by a narrow margin in favor of statehood. Yigal Yadin, who would serve as Chief of Operations for the Israel Defense Forces during the War of Independence, said, "The decision on the proclamation was solely due to David Ben-Gurion. In its significance and impact, that decision was comparable to thousands of [military] operations."*
  - *Slide: Declares Independence: On May 14, 1948, a day before the British withdrawal, Ben-Gurion proclaims independence at the Tel Aviv Museum.*

*The audience bursts into Hatikva. Ben-Gurion reads the text of the declaration. Thirty-seven minutes later he strikes the table with his gavel and says “The State of Israel has arisen!”*

- *Slide: Wartime Leader: On May 14, the armies of Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Transjordan and Egypt pour into Palestine. Ben-Gurion, as prime minister and defense minister, takes the lead in guiding the state during the war. Israel emerges the victor after 10 months of fighting, interrupted by several periods of truce. Chaim Herzog, who later serves as president of Israel, and fought in the war, writes of Ben Gurion: “The spirit that animated the people and the courage it reflected were the function of a rare form of determined and inspiring leadership. He made mistakes but they were those of a very great man.”*
- *Slide: Mass Immigration: After the war, Ben-Gurion focuses on bringing in masses of Jews, although not the European Jews he had once hoped to bring. He says: “The people that conceived, nurtured, and realized the great pioneering enterprise, the acme of which is labor agricultural settlement, that people has been annihilated and is no more ... This country needs, and from now on can be built by, a different Jewish people, a people that did not acquire the Hebrew and humanist education given to European Jewry, a people whose fate it was to live for hundreds of years in downtrodden, backward and poor countries.” Ben-Gurion is speaking of Jews from countries like Iraq, Libya, Yemen and Morocco. One historian says, “Ben-Gurion almost singlehandedly coerced Mapai, the Cabinet, and the Jewish Agency ... to open the gates to mass immigration.” The state of 700,000 doubles its size in four years. The financial burden on the state is tremendous. At one point, 200,000 people live in tents.*
- *Slide: German Reparations: The huge influx of people strains the state’s resources. Historian Michael Bar-Zohar says, “Time and again, the money ran out and the government’s warehouses were left bare of basic foodstuffs. On several occasions, the country’s population was dependent upon a ship bringing a cargo of wheat or flour.” To ease the burden on Israel’s economy, Ben-Gurion in 1951 seeks \$1 billion in reparations from the West German government for the Nazi theft of Jewish property. Germany is prepared to do it, but the decision splits Israel with many calling it blood money. The campaign against reparations is led by Herut Party leader Menachem Begin. At one point his followers storm the Knesset throwing rocks through the windows. But Ben-Gurion prevails and the Knesset votes to accept reparations from Germany.*
- *Slide: Sde Boker: In November, 1953, Ben-Gurion steps down as prime minister and retires to Kibbutz Sdeh Boker in the Negev. In part, he*

- chooses this isolated location hoping to inspire a new generation to take up pioneering. He is replaced as prime minister by Moshe Sharett, who had served as foreign minister.*
- *Slide: Ben-Gurion's Return: In the mid-1950s, Arab guerrillas, also known as fedayeen, start carrying out cross-border raids into Israel from the Gaza Strip. They are armed and trained by Egypt. Ben-Gurion grows unhappy with Sharett, whom he feels is not aggressive enough in countering the threat and returns as Defense Minister. He takes a tougher approach to the terrorists, ordering retaliatory raids against Gaza. In the Knesset elections of 1955, Ben-Gurion pushes out Sharett and returns as prime minister. Ben-Gurion unites the country under the slogan Ein Breira, which means "no alternative," meaning Israel has no choice but to take forceful action against the Arab enemy.*
  - *Slide: Sinai Campaign: Israel's retaliatory raids stop working as a deterrent. Egypt's President Gamal Abdel Nasser makes a deal with the Soviet Union for weapons and attempts an encirclement campaign to isolate Israel, first closing off the Gulf of Aqaba to Israeli shipping, and then forging agreements with surrounding Arab states. When Nasser nationalizes the Suez Canal on July 26, 1956, Ben-Gurion sees an opportunity as Britain and France wish to stop the takeover of the Canal. The three countries agree to take part in a joint military operation. On October 29, 1956, Israel takes control of the Sinai Peninsula. The British and French then land paratroopers along the canal. For a moment, it looks as if Israel will add the Sinai to its territory, and Ben-Gurion makes a speech to that effect. But the U.S. pressures Ben-Gurion to withdraw. However, the Sinai Campaign, also known as Operation Kadesh, will gain Israel 10 years of quiet on its southern border.*
  - *Slide: Generational Conflict: In the late 1950s, Ben-Gurion decides that it's time for a new generation of leaders to take the helm. He mentors several, including Yigal Yadin, Shimon Peres, Abba Eban and others. Ben-Gurion insists on including some of the younger members in the Cabinet for the 1959 elections. But while the move is in that the Mapai Party wins its biggest number of seats ever, there are bad feelings among the older leaders who feel they are being skipped over. One historian writes: "Clashes between veterans and the young leaders went on almost incessantly. ... The clashes aggravated the sense of alienation dividing Ben-Gurion from his veteran colleagues, while bitterness and anger gradually replaced the trust and admiration they had showered on him for so long. ... One after another, Ben-Gurion's oldest friends and colleagues broke their links with him."*

- Slide: Rafi Party: *The discontent leads Ben-Gurion to create a new party in 1965 called the Rafi Party. He's joined by his young proteges. The party has an ambitious agenda but makes a poor showing in the election, winning only 10 seats. Ben-Gurion slowly withdraws from political life. He resigns his Knesset seat in 1970.*
- Slide: Ben-Gurion's Death: *Ben-Gurion dies three years later, on December 1st, 1973, at the age of 86. At his request, he is not buried on Mount Herzl with other leaders of Zionism but in the desert at Sdeh Boker.*

3. Play video: Freedom of Action

Introduce inquiry question: What were Ben-Gurion's main contributions as prime minister?

4. Whole class discussion:

- Do you agree with Ben-Gurion's decision to pursue Germany for reparations?
- Was Ben-Gurion correct in bringing in a younger generation to replace the older Mapai leaders?
- Ben-Gurion's decision to advance the younger generation at the expense of the old reflects the party system in Israel where voters vote for their preferred party and not for individuals. In America, the situation is different where congressman and senators and the president are elected directly as individuals by the people. Which system do you think is best?
- Ben-Gurion is sometimes called the 'Father of Modern Israel'. Do you think he earns that title?

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

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

At the post-congress meeting of the Zionist Actions Committee [1946], Ben-Gurion announced that he was assuming the defense portfolio of the Zionist Executive. Up to that point he had not been directly involved in defense activity, although no operations were undertaken without his approval. This change of status was designed to grant political significance to what he had told the Haganah people at a joint meeting of activists from the Haganah, the Palmach, and the Mossad for Illegal Immigration (which organized the ships bringing illegal immigrants) after the congress: the moment of decision was approaching. The Haganah people wanted to renew violent operations and were angered by the decision not to. Ben-Gurion explained that a Jewish state would soon be established, which would lead to war not only with the Palestinian Arabs, but with the Arab states. Therefore no actions must be taken that would provide the British with grounds for destroying the Yishuv’s defense force. Furthermore, preparation must be made for what was to come. They did not really believe him, assuming that he had simply invented an excuse for not renewing operations.

Although many spoke of “a Jewish state now,” only a few believed that it would be established in the next few years. It was more of a slogan than a political forecast. Ben-Gurion’s assessment that the establishment of the state was imminent, and that it would bring in its wake a bloody war against the Arab states’ regular forces, was one of his astonishing intuitions. During his first visit to the United States at the end of the war in Europe, he had revealed his thoughts on this subject on an extraordinary occasion. At his request, Henry Montor, future chairman of the United Jewish Appeal, gave him a list of seventeen wealthy Jews who were prepared to enlist in the Zionist cause. He called each one personally and invited him to a meeting at the New York home of Rudolf G. Sonneborn on Sunday, 1 July 1945. Although there were still transportation problems in America, since the war with Japan was not yet over, all of the invitees from all over the country arrived on time for the meeting, which opened in the morning and went on all day. Ben-Gurion presented his Zionist perspective and explained that a Jewish state would be established in

Palestine after the war and would have to fight for its existence against the Arab armies. The Jews would withstand the onslaught, he said, but do to so they needed arms. In America, the sale of military surplus for scrap had begun, and equipment to create a military industry in Palestine could be purchased at very low cost. Ben-Gurion asked those present to set up a special fund for this procurement. Captivated by his vision, the Americans agreed.

Afterward, Ben-Gurion referred to the establishment of “the Sonneborn Foundation,” the special fund’s codename, as one of the three great achievements of his life. The other two were his immigration to Palestine in 1906 and the establishment of the State of Israel. Many years later, when he was retired, he wrote to Sonneborn: “I will never forget – I think that our people will never forget – that meeting in your home on 1.7.1945 which enabled us to create our military industry.” The equipment was shipped to Palestine disassembled and camouflaged as spare parts and agricultural machinery, then reassembled. This machinery was the foundation of Israel Military Industries. At the 1946 Paris meeting of the Zionist Actions Committee, Ben-Gurion requested that three million dollars be allocated for military procurement, a vast sum at the time. The Zionist Executive approved the allocation, and Ben-Gurion sent Ehud Avriel and Yehuda Arazi to procure heavy weaponry that would be shipped to Palestine after the state was established.

*Source: Ben-Gurion: Father of Modern Israel, Anita Shapira, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2014, p. 148-149.*

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

In the course of the summer of 1947, Ben-Gurion had a growing feeling that neither the Zionist movement, the Jewish community in Palestine, nor the Haganah were sufficiently aware of the dreadful dangers in store for them. His sense of foreboding was powerful, but he failed to impress his premonitions on his listeners. Some of his warnings were dismissed as fantasies. Even at a closed session attended by some of the Haganah leaders, the military chiefs spoke only of weapons suitable for platoons or sections; no one mentioned support weapons. Ben-Gurion listened carefully and suddenly asked: “And what about cannon? And airplanes?” For a moment, there was silence in the room. The men looked at one another; several of them had to control themselves to keep from laughing. “He’s crazy,” someone whispered. “What’s he talking about? We’re speaking of Stens and rifles, and he dreams of cannon and airplanes,” Ben-Gurion went on: “There’s going to be a war. The Arab countries will unite and ... there will be battlefronts. This will no longer be a war of platoons or sections. It is essential to set up a modern army. It is essential to think of the requirements of a modern army.”

***Vocabulary***

Stens: reference to Sten guns, a British light submachine gun.

*Source: Ben-Gurion: A Biography, Michael Bar-Zohar, Adama Books, New York, 1977, p. 146.*

**Document C: “Ben-Gurion The Burning Ground 1886-1948”, Shabtai Teveth (1987)**

The end of the war meant the end of the great double formula as well. Once Zionism was rid of its commitment to help the British army in the war against Hitler, combative Zionism – shelved when Italy entered the war in 1940 – burst into life, this time without opposition. The immigration war began in force, and the refugees of Hitler’s death camps encountered on Palestine’s shores the clubs and bullets of British soldiers. ... The survivors killed by the British on Palestine’s shores, and others who were turned away, brought Zionism added sympathy and support.

The media – indifferent in 1939 when the British had not hesitated to open fire on refugees abroad the *Aghios Nikolaus*, killing one of them – eagerly covered, in vivid detail, the survivor’s struggle against the Royal Navy. The drama Ben-Gurion produced from the pent-up pressure of the survivors and the shut gates reached its peak with the *Exodus 1947*. The ship, with 4,450 illegals, including hundreds of infants, on board, all DPs, [Displaced Persons] was intercepted by the Royal Navy on July 18, 1947, and escorted to Haifa. There, in a clash with the army, three illegals were killed and dozens wounded. The ship and its passengers were escorted to France, and when the illegals refused to disembark there, the ship was ordered to sail to Hamburg, in the British zone. There they were removed from the ship by force and, struggling, were returned to the DP camps in Germany before the eyes of the world press.

*Source: Ben-Gurion The Burning Ground 1886-1948, Shabtai Teveth, Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston 1987, p. 874.*

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

As night fell, an incessant flow of reports poured in from the battlefronts: clashes on the road to Jerusalem; bitter tidings from the Etzion bloc, negotiations for surrender in Jaffa. The time had come to reach a decision. The issue put to the vote was whether to accept or reject the United States’ proposal for a cease-fire. Consenting to a cease-fire meant postponement of the proclamation of the state. Six members [of the People’s Administration] voted against the cease-fire and in favor of proclaiming the state immediately, including Ben-Gurion and Sharett. Four members voted to accept the American proposal and postpone independence, including two leading Mapai members. It was decided that the Jewish state would be established on 14 May.

This decision was followed by another debate on the decisive issue of whether the Proclamation of Independence should specify the boundaries of the state. Ben-Gurion certainly did not want to issue a specific declaration that would curtail his aspirations to extend the boundaries of the state. He proceeded to reveal some of his ideas to his colleagues: “If the U.N. does not come into account in this matter and they [the Arab states] make war against us and we defeat them ... why should we bind ourselves?” By a single vote, five to four, his view was adopted: the state’s boundaries would not be mentioned in the Proclamation of Independence.

That event, the Mapai Central Committee convened for a third time and approved the text of the proclamation presented by the formulation committee. The largest party within the Jewish community decided to advise the People’s Administration “immediately to proclaim the termination of the Mandate and the establishment of the Jewish state and its provisional government.” “Under existing circumstances,” Yigael Yadin was to comment later, “the decision on the proclamation was solely due to David Ben-Gurion. In its significance and impact, that decision was comparable to thousands of [military] operations.”

On 13 May, the Jewish community was highly excited as rumors spread about the imminent Proclamation of Independence. But the excitement and jubilation were mixed with growing apprehension in view of the reports of the battle at the Etzion bloc, which housed 550 people. At 4:30 p.m. news arrived of the fall of Kfar Etzion. After a brief consultation, Ben-Gurion, Levi Eshkol, and Galili decided to send a telegram to the defenders of the other settlements in the bloc saying that if they were unable to keep on fighting, they should destroy their weapons and hoist the white flag. The decision was painful and depressing. Bad news also came in from the Negev: the Egyptians had attacked Kfar Darom in great force. The atmosphere at the General Staff was gloomy. A last-minute appeal arrived from Abdullah, who repeated his proposals to Golda Meir, but his suggestions was rejected. ...

That night, Ben-Gurion slept about two hours. He rose at seven o'clock, as was his habit, and drank a cup of black coffee while seated at the kitchen table and studying papers and messages. It was his routine way of starting the day. Nothing in his behavior indicated any particular excitement. Ben-Gurion was already at his office when just after eight he heard the drone of a plane in the sky. This was the light plane carrying the British High Commissioner, General Cunningham to Haifa, where he was to board H.M.S. *Euryalus* and wait in coastal waters till the termination of the Mandate. At midnight, on the night of 14-15 May, the British Mandate over Palestine would come to an end. Because of the sanctity of the Sabbath, it was essential to issue the Proclamation of Independence before darkness fell.

Secretaries, stenographers and officials were engaged in frantic preparations for the proclamation. Eminent persons from all sections of the population had been invited to the ceremony, due to be held at four o'clock that afternoon at the Tel Aviv Museum. Flags and furnishings were hurriedly brought to the hall. Ben-Gurion put on a white shirt, a dark suit, and a tie, and at four o'clock his black car halted at the steps leading to the museum entrance. Even though the site of the ceremony had been kept a strict secret, the street was crowded, and there was a throng of journalists and photographers present. In some mysterious fashion, thousands of Tel Aviv citizens

had found out where the ceremony was to be held, and they hurried to be present – even if at a distance – at the event that would make them into a free people.

As Ben-Gurion and Paula got out of the car, a policeman posted on the pavement saluted. Momentarily, Ben-Gurion froze, drew himself up stiffly, and returned the salute proudly and vigorously. Then, at a run, he climbed the steps to the museum's main entrance. At precisely four o'clock, he struck the table with his gavel. The audience arose and spontaneously burst into *Hatikva*, the anthem of the Zionist movement. Ben-Gurion picked up two typewritten pages of the text of the Proclamation of Independence and began to read it out.

In clear, powerful words, the text described the exile of the Jewish people, its yearnings to return to its homeland, the emergence of the Zionist movement, the “pioneers, immigrants and defenders” who came to the Land of Israel. The proclamation referred to the Balfour Declaration, depicted the Holocaust and the war which the Jews had waged against the Nazis. It was only as Ben-Gurion read the proclamation that the Jews of the Land of Israel learned the name of their new country: the State of Israel.

### **Vocabulary**

Mapai: a political party founded by the merger of two smaller parties on January 5, 1930 and led by David Ben-Gurion.

Source: *Ben-Gurion: A Biography*, Michael Bar-Zohar, Adama Books, New York, 1977, p. 160-163.

**Document E: “The Arab-Israeli Wars”, Chaim Herzog, (1982)**

Israel’s victory was the result of self-sacrifice and determination of a people to fight for its existence. The spirit that animated the people and the courage it reflected were the function of a rare form of determined and inspiring leadership. David Ben-Gurion belongs in history to the class of Churchill, Roosevelt and De Gaulle – a powerful, charismatic leader with sufficient vision to see several steps ahead and to grasp the basic issues facing the nation, with sufficient courage to lead against impossible odds and to demand the most extreme sacrifices from his people. ... Had he not grasped the significance of the new developments, events would have overtaken the Jews of Palestine and found them completely unprepared, both politically and militarily. While Ben-Gurion’s colleagues, and indeed his political opponents, were thinking in terms of commando raids and small unit warfare, Ben-Gurion realized that there would be no compromise and he would have to go the whole way.

*Source: The Arab-Israeli Wars: War and Peace in the Middle East from the 1948 War of Independence to the Present, Chaim Herzog, updated by Shlomo Gazit, Vintage Books, A Division of Random House, New York, 2004 (First Published 1982), p. 106.*

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

There were prominent members of Mapai, and of the Cabinet, who feared that unrestricted immigration would lead to the collapse of the state. Logically, they were right. How could a state with 700,000 inhabitants absorb hundreds of thousands of immigrants every year? Ben-Gurion however, paid no heed to his colleagues' counsel. Almost single-handed, he coerced Mapai, the Cabinet, and the Jewish Agency into adopting their most important decision since the establishment of the state: to open the gates to mass immigration. ...

The target set by Ben-Gurion was to double the population of the state within four years, and this mass immigration unfolded as a splendid, exciting epic. The flow of immigrants began while the War of Independence was at its height. Over 100,000 Jews arrived between 14 May and 31 December 1948. While fighting for its very life, the state found the inner resources to care for them, and provide them with a livelihood. In 1949, the flow turned into a flood: 239,576 immigrants reached the country that year; in 1950, 170,249; in 1951, 175,095. Within four years, 686,748 immigrants entered the country, and, together with natural increase, they helped to boost the population by 120 percent. Ben-Gurion's objective had been achieved in full.

*Source: Source: Ben-Gurion: A Biography, Michael Bar-Zohar, Adama Books, New York, 1977, p. 188.*

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

Ben-Gurion was trying to assess the German debt to the Jews. In the wake of the Holocaust, the German Federal Republic, it seemed to him, should be Israel’s chief benefactor. And he had to strike while at least some Germans were tormented with a sense of guilt.

Thus, in March 1952, he submitted a claim to the four occupying powers – the United States, Britain, France and Russia – for one and a half billion dollars covering the Jewish property looted and burned by the Nazis. But the powers balked. Deal with the Germans directly, they replied. And Ben-Gurion announced that he would – setting off an emotional explosion that threatened to rip Israel apart.

Accept blood money from the fiendish murderers? cried Mapam and Herut.

No blood money, Ben-Gurion retorted. “There was no atonement for genocide.” But, he reasoned, the sins of the fathers should not be visited on the sons, “for that is racial theory.” He would demand only compensation for lost Jewish property. And he quoted the Bible to “prove” that this was proper. The Nazi victims, in dying, had themselves called out for a strong and prosperous Jewish state that would protect its people from another Holocaust. And this was one way to meet their demand. Israelis must be practical.

But some were not. When violinist Jascha Heifetz came to Israel intending to play the works of the German composer Richard Strauss, one young Israeli struck the musician’s hand with an iron bar. Ben-Gurion respected the protester’s view despite his own feeling that music should be judged only on its own merits, but now he advised Heifetz to play Strauss as planned and agreed to attend the performance himself – “even though I don’t understand music.”

Ben-Gurion tackled reparations no less defiantly. In December 1951 he called in Nahum Goldmann, chairman of the Jewish Agency, which still represented world Jewry, and blurted out an order: See Chancellor Konrad Adenauer and ask for a billion dollars! (East

Germany, he calculated, owed the remaining half-billion but would surely not pay it.) Goldmann flew to West Germany and presented the aging, stone-faced German leader with the bill, expecting to be shown quickly to the door. But instead Goldmann walked out leisurely with a promise of more than eight hundred million dollars.

Ben-Gurion was delighted and called a meeting of the Knesset to approve negotiations on the basis of this promise. By the time the session opened in Jerusalem on January 7, 1952, Israel was in violent ferment. Unperturbed, Ben-Gurion stood up and stressed again the need for German reparations. “Let not the murderers of our people be also their inheritors.”

An emotional storm suddenly swept the Knesset, and one member shouted that his small son had asked him: “What price will we get for Grandpa and Grandma?”

A few blocks away Menachem Begin stood on a balcony in Zion Square haranguing a crowd about the evils of Ben-Gurion’s proposal. Relations between the two men had not improved since the 1948 war, though politics, not “terror,” was now the issue. Ben-Gurion treated Begin’s Herut Party like a pariah, charging that it was as dangerous to the state as the Communist Party. Though Herut was legal, he cried, it was beyond the pale. He refused to let his government grant pensions to the widows of Irgunists or Sternists killed in the 1948 war though it granted them to Hagana widows. And in the Knesset he wouldn’t even call Begin by name, contemptuously referring to him as “the member sitting next to Mr. Bader.” Begin had to be totally discredited and kept out of the government at all cost. If he ever came to power – God forbid – he would, in Ben-Gurion’s view, destroy the Histadrut, antagonize the world, and betray the destiny of Israel as mankind’s redeemer. He would foul Ben-Gurion’s dream.

But to Begin, Ben-Gurion, with his “soft,” “expedient” tactics, was fouling *his* dream – a Greater Israel, proud, militant, middle-class. And now he held up a slip of paper and cried with inflammatory zeal:

I have not come to inflame you, but this note has just been handed to me. It says that the police have grenades that contain gas made in Germany, the same gas used to kill your fathers and mothers. We are prepared to suffer anything – torture chambers, concentration camps and subterranean prisons – so that any decision to deal with Germany will not come to pass. ... This will be a war of life or death.

The crowd dispersed, and several thousand youths raced toward the Knesset, many lugging sacks of stones. Policemen on nearby roofs dropped tear gas bombs and fired over the heads of the attackers, who threw stones at them, burned automobiles, and halted ambulances loaded with wounded policemen. Amos Ben-Gurion, now a police chief, rushed into the Knesset to see his father.

“Can we fire at them if we need to?” he asked breathlessly.

“Even if they destroy the Knesset, don’t fire at them!” the father roared.

Suddenly stones crashed through the windows, hitting one member while the others scrambled for safety. Tear gas puffed through the broken panes as handkerchiefs were pulled from pockets amid coughs and cries of fear. But Ben-Gurion did not reach for his as he listened to the shouts of the mob, the wail of police and ambulance sirens, the explosion of gas grenades, and the crackle of flames from a burning car. Let his eyes tear, his throat burn. Was the Temple toppling again, demolished by his own people?

Begin then stormed in and strode to the platform as stones continued to whiz through the shattered panes. He glared at his audience cowering in the corners. Reparations from Germany? Shameful! And he read off a list of rabbis, scholars and poets who had signed a petition rejecting such a deal. Ben-Gurion rose and, pointing to the windows, cried, “They are not identified with your hooligans in the street!”

Begin shot back, “You are the hooligan!”

The chairman of the session demanded that Begin apologize, but he refused. “If I am not permitted to speak, no one will speak!”

And no one did. The Knesset was recessed. ...

A few days later the Knesset convened to vote on the reparations question, and hardly a member was missing. One Begin follower who had just suffered a heart attack was carried in on a stretcher. Ben-Gurion calmly kept count, his face expressionless even when the results were announced – a victory for him by sixty-one to fifty. A great triumph! he exulted. Pragmatism, not emotionalism, would guide Israeli policy. His people were learning. Now the state would benefit from about eight hundred million dollars’ worth of machinery, raw materials and rolling stock. And who cared if it came from the devil – or his sons?

*Source: Ben-Gurion: Prophet of Fire, Dan Kurzman, Simon & Schuster, New York, 1983, p. 336-339.*

**Document H: “Ben-Gurion: State Builder”, Avraham  
Avi-hai (1974)**

Despite the growing number of Israel casualties inflicted by Arab infiltrators – the number for 1951 alone was 137 – and despite the fact that such incidents were in violation of the 1949 armistice agreements, each individual act did not constitute a *casus belli*, in the accepted sense. ...

The resulting policy of limited conflict (“retaliatory raids”), initiated by Ben Gurion in his capacity as minister of defense, was ultimately based on the right of self-defense and the desire to maintain the *status quo*. The latter was understood by Israel as meaning that, in the absence of further action, the 1949 armistice agreements were to constitute the factual and legal basis for the territorial limits of Israel and for its neighbors’ relations with it. ...

It became clear that “the Israeli counter raids, though costly to the enemy, no longer had the power to deter them.” The stage for a preventive war was worked out by Ben Gurion; with his return to the premiership, the stage was set for the Sinai Campaign of October 1956. The 1955-6 pattern of attack and counterattack contributed to escalation. In any case, Egypt’s gearing up to strategic weaponry through the Soviet arms deal of 1955 meant that the days of the policy’s effectiveness were numbered. ...

Over the years, the Egyptian regime consistently tightened its control on the Gulf of Aqabah. In September 1955, Nasser, probably made confident by the soon-to-be delivered weapons [from the Soviet Union], interdicted this waterway to all Israeli traffic. Ben Gurion typically sought a response which would stop just short of war (or on the brink) and present Egypt with a *fait accompli* before its army has assimilated the new weaponry. At the end of October he ordered Chief of Staff Moshe Dayan to prepare a plan for capturing the Straits of Tiran, which control the narrow ingress to the Gulf. In the presentation of his cabinet on November 2, 1955, Ben Gurion alluded to the war option.

Egypt now seeks to seal the Red Sea route to Israeli vessels, contrary to the international principle of freedom of the seas. This one-sided war will have to stop, for it cannot remain one-sided forever. If our rights are assailed by acts of violence on land or sea, we shall reserve freedom of action to defend those rights in the most effective manner. We seek peace – but not suicide. ...

A decision had been made in principle. The final decision which determined the timing of the “defensive actions” came on October 24, after secret negotiations with the French had assured Ben Gurion that the risks could be minimalized. The previous summer’s Suez Canal crisis had brought Israel some relief from its feeling of total isolation, but the attachment of Jordan to the Joint Egypt-Syria Military Command put the capstone on the pattern of encirclement. The 1956 Sinai-Suez war began on October 29, 1956, and ended with the IDF in full control of the Sinai Peninsula, five days later. ...

That war, Ben Gurion’s decision, and the IDF’s swift victory accomplished Israel’s basic aims of opening the Gulf of Aqabah, halting infiltration from Sinai and Gaza, making a shambles out of Nasser’s encirclement attempts, and “restoring a qualitative weapons lead by the destruction or capture of much of Egypt’s Soviet bloc equipment, which was conveniently, if threateningly, stockpiled along Israel’s southwest frontier.”

The general geopolitical situation – Arab encirclement, growing Arab strength, and Israel’s increasing isolation – was the key factor in Ben Gurion’s strategic evaluation which led to the Sinai campaign. By early 1956, he recognized the race between the two superpowers for influence in the Arab world as being detrimental and dangerous to Israel. In addition, Britain was trying desperately to cling to its shrinking bases of power. All these factors worked against Israel. France, whose influence in the Middle East had been severely curtailed by the British during and immediately after World War II, was a ray of light in the sharpening regional situation, largely because of its position in Algeria.

Ben Gurion used the French-British intervention in Egypt to ensure air cover over Israel and free his army and air force to sweep Sinai, destroy the Egyptian military capability, and open the Straits of Tiran. His verbal efforts to disassociate the Sinai and Suez actions from each other reflect both an attempt to explain Israel's immediate aims and to prevent it from appearing as riding on the coattails of the two European ex-imperial powers. The Israel-French liaison of the time illustrates another aspect of Ben Gurion, his great caution. The IDF had not been tested in a major action since 1948-49. The Egyptian army, with much greater firepower and new equipment, was not the defeated Egyptian force of eight years earlier. Thus prudence dictated the association with the French and their British partners. Another of Ben Gurion's traits – that of honoring his personal commitments to foreign statesmen – is illustrated by the fact that he has never admitted to his secret trip to France in October 1956, at which Anglo-French-Israeli collaboration was worked out in detail. ...

Ben Gurion had to weigh the immediate advantage of war against the long-term dangers of big-power intervention or involvement. He was well aware that Israel's ability to win a regional victory would not guarantee a solution in the second realm of his reality – the world scene. To be justified morally and politically, war must be "inevitable," and on balance defensive. To protect the territorial base of Jewish existence, anything, even war, is permissible. It must be a last resort, and not a technique, and is not to be fought for aggrandizement.

After the Sinai Campaign, Ben Gurion was overwhelmed by the wine of victory. Setting caution aside, he made a speech which staked out a claim on Sinai and particularly the two islands in the Straits of Tiran. Sobriety, restored by external political pressures, expressed itself in the withdrawal from Sinai. Ben Gurion has said that this was the one speech he regretted having made.

*Source: Ben-Gurion: State Builder, Avraham Avi-hai, John Wiley & Sons, New York, 1974, p. 127-136.*

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

[I]n March 1958, the Old Man summoned the leaders of Mapai’s “youngsters” to clarify their mission in the state.

At the [forthcoming Mapai] conference, I intend to speak about the need to bring a new generation into the leadership ... There is a generation that was born here before the state, and there is already a young generation that was brought up in the period of statehood – all those who were ten years old when the state was founded. These are the people of the future. They have done great things; they fought in the War of Independence and the Sinai Campaign and displayed their abilities. They must be charged with the leadership of the state and the movement – jointly with the veterans, for the time being, but they will not survive long. This change will meet with objections within the party, but they must be resisted.

His closing words were more of an understatement than Ben-Gurion would have dreamed. This meeting with the “youngsters” was the first shot of the bitter war of succession that would rage in Mapai for years to come and serve as the background to the Lavon Affair. His statement shows that Ben-Gurion not only supported the younger generation’s assault on the leadership, he actually instigated it. And it proves that the suspicions of the veteran Mapai leaders were quite justified; he had decided gradually to replace them with young blood.

By early November 1959, Ben-Gurion had completed his plans for bringing younger men into the national leadership. The Cabinet he would form after the elections would include three young men: Abba Eban, Moshe Dayan, and Yigael Yadin (Peres being marked for deputy minister of defense). He spoke with Dayan about his plans for the future, but the ex-army chief remained evasive, contending that he did not wish to be elected to the Knesset. All the same, Ben-Gurion decided that Dayan would serve in the next Cabinet as minister of agriculture. Eban was to return to Israel in mid-1959 after an extended tour as ambassador to the United States, but he had already been appointed president of the Weizmann Institute of

Science. The Old Man came nonetheless to an agreement with him whereby he would be elected to the Knesset and serve in the next Cabinet as minister without portfolio. Yadin, however, expressed profound misgivings. ...

Even before Yadin had rejected Ben-Gurion's offer, however, the party rebelled. When Ben-Gurion told her of his talks with the three young men, Golda Meir immediately notified him (not for the first time) that she would not remain in the Cabinet after the elections. Histadrut secretary Pinhas Lavon also challenged the young leaders, and the Mapai Party apparatus, known as the "Bloc", was up in arms. Ben-Gurion failed in several of his attempts to achieve a reconciliation between the older and younger leaders. On the surface, the party retained its inner harmony, but the confrontation actually grew sharper, with the Mapai veterans (headed by Golda Meir, Zalman Aranne, Pinhas Lavon, and Pinhas Sapir) waging a constant battle against their younger colleagues. ...

The Knesset elections were held on 3 November, and the results showed that Mapai had gained the greatest triumph in its history. Winning seven additional seats, it now had forty-seven Knesset members and reached the pinnacle of its power. Many commentators attributed the stunning victory to the young candidates featured in Mapai's slate. But if anyone thought that the election victory would put an end to the contest between the generations within the party, he was deluding himself. On the contrary, once the elections consolidated the power and standing of the younger leaders, the veterans deployed to protect their positions.

Golda Meir and Zalman Aranne hoisted the standard of revolt, adamantly refusing to join the new Cabinet. Ben-Gurion devoted his principal efforts to courting them back to appeasing Pinhas Lavon. It was late November before Golda consented to return to the Foreign Ministry. (The same day, Zalman Aranne also agreed to resume his former post.) But Golda's consent had a price. Ben-Gurion had marked Abba Eban to act as a kind of information minister whose task would be to represent Israeli views abroad. Golda objected violently, even refusing to permit Eban's office to be located in the

Foreign Ministry building. Ben-Gurion capitulated. He also found a tenuous *modus vivendi* with Lavon.

Still, internal harmony had not truly been restored, for clashes between veterans and the young leaders went on almost incessantly. Again, Ben-Gurion rose to protect the younger leaders. They held on to his coattails, while he blazed the trail for them. The clashes aggravated the sense of alienation dividing Ben-Gurion from his veteran colleagues, while bitterness and anger gradually replaced the trust and admiration they had showered on him for so long.

**Vocabulary**

Lavon Affair: Refers to a failed Israeli covert operation conducted in Egypt in the summer of 1954 that eventually led to the resignation of Israeli defense minister Pinhas Lavon.

Source: *Ben-Gurion: A Biography*, Michael Bar-Zohar, Adama Books, New York, 1977, p. 283-285.

