

Center for Israel Education

David Ben-Gurion

The Leadership Series



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Leadership Series: David Ben-Gurion
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Published by Center for Israel Education, P.O. Box 15129, Atlanta, GA 30333.

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Printed in USA.

1. His Early Life

"We must master our own fate – we must take destiny into our own hands! [This is] necessary...for our future survival as a free and independent people."

-David Ben-Gurion

David Ben-Gurion was born in Płońsk, Poland on October 16, 1886. Płońsk was at the time part of the Russian Empire. His name at birth was David Grün, but he later changed his last name to Ben-Gurion, a Hebrew version of his last name.

When he was 11, his mother, Scheindel, passed away. His father, Avigdor, was a lawyer, educator, and leader in the "Lovers of Zion" movement (in Hebrew called Hovevei Zion). Zionism is the national movement calling for the return of the Jewish people to Israel. "Lovers of Zion" particularly emphasized furthering Jewish settlement in the Land of Israel through agriculture. Ben-Gurion attended his father's Hebrew school, which was very Zionist.



Map of European Russia at the end of the nineteenth century

Source: [public domain](#).

2. Ben-Gurion's Teenage Years

"If an expert says it can't be done, get another expert."

-David Ben-Gurion



Ben-Gurion as volunteer
in Jewish Legion in 1918

Source: Martin Gilbert,
Wikimedia Commons. [public domain](#)
([details](#)).

Ben-Gurion became very interested in Zionism as a teenager, influenced heavily in his home. At the age of 14, together with two friends, he founded a youth club called "Ezra." The club promoted studying Hebrew and emigration to the land of Israel.

He attended college at the University of Warsaw, where he joined the Social-Democratic Jewish Workers' Party (in Hebrew called *Poalei Zion*). During the Russian Revolution of 1905, he was arrested twice.

Ben-Gurion discussed his hometown in his memoirs:

"For many of us, anti-Semitic feeling had little to do with our dedication [to Zionism]. I personally never suffered anti-Semitic persecution. Płock was remarkably free of it ... Nevertheless, and I think this very significant, it was Płock that sent the highest proportion of Jews to Eretz Israel from any town in Poland of comparable size. We emigrated not for negative reasons of escape but for the positive purpose of rebuilding a homeland ... Life in Płock was peaceful enough."



House in Płock, Poland
where Ben-Gurion grew

Source: [Rafał Zieliński](#). This file is licensed under the Creative Commons - Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Poland license.



Founding of the Hebrew University of
Jerusalem (1925)

Source: Matson (G. Eric and Edith) Photograph collection at the Library of Congress. According to the library, there are no known copyright restrictions on the use of this work.



Source: Cohen Fritz, National Photo Collection

4. Ben-Gurion's Family

"No matter what the future holds, I will not despair of achieving higher education in philosophy and in the natural sciences." - David Ben-Gurion

In 1915, Ben-Gurion met Russian-born Paula Munweis while in New York City. Ben-Gurion and Munweis got married in 1917. The couple had three children: two daughters, Geula Ben-Eliezer and Renana Leshem, and one son, Amos. Amos would later become Deputy Inspector-General of the Israeli Police, as well as the Director-General of a textile factory. Renana would go on to work as a microbiologist for the Institute for Biological Research.



L to R: David & Paula Ben-Gurion, youngest daughter Renana, Geula, father Avigdor Grün, and Amos.

Source: GPO Photographer, [public domain](#).

5. The British Mandate

"In Israel, in order to be a realist you must believe in miracles." - David Ben-Gurion

Prior to, during, and after World War I, Britain entered into a series of agreements with local leaders in the Middle East. In return for supporting British during the war, they secured British influence. On April 25, 1920, the Supreme Council of the League of Nations allocated the Palestine Mandate to Great Britain. The twenty-eight articles in the Mandate for Palestine reflected Britain's commitment to the development of a Jewish national home.

Because the articles in the Mandate for Palestine were pro-Zionist, the Arabs of Palestine boycotted official cooperation with the British. Each time questions arose about changing the precise language in the Mandate articles, Jewish and Zionist leaders did their best to prevent any changes. The Mandate's Articles were not altered, but Britain did periodically revise, sometimes dramatically, the manner in which it supported the development of the Jewish national home. The most notable example was in 1939 when it severely limited Jewish immigration and land purchase in response to violence in Palestine, contrary to the spirit and wording in the articles of the Mandate.

6. Founding of Mapai

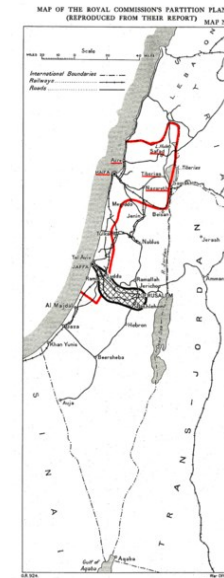
In 1930, Ben-Gurion created Mapai, the Land of Israel Workers' Party, which was a coalition of the major labor Zionist movements. The two parties that merged together were The Young Workers Party (Hapoel Hazair) and Labor Unity (Ahdut Ha'avodah). In 1933, Mapai took control over the Zionist Organization. Two years later, Ben-Gurion became Chairman of the Zionist Actions Committee and of the Jewish Agency, an organization founded in 1929 in order to build up the land of Israel and connect world Jewry to the development of a Jewish state.



Hebrew writing translating to: "We should be given the task of completing the work."

Source: A Mapai Party billboard prior to the 1951 Knesset elections.

Ben-Gurion's left-wing, socialist politics often clashed with the right-wing revisionist politicians, led by Vladimir Jabotinsky. The majority of the Mapai party supported the 1937 British Peel Commission, which called for the creation of both a Jewish and Arab state, with the British retaining control of Jerusalem and part of central Israel. The Revisionists opposed this partition. They argued that this would set a dangerous precedent for compromising Jewish rights to parts of the land. Despite Ben-Gurion's mobilization of support for this plan, the British abandoned it in response to Arab opposition and challenges to implementation.



Source: [public domain](#).

Peel Commission
Plan map

8. Founding of State of Israel

"To tell you the truth, the joy was not a part of me - not because I didn't appreciate the decision of the UN. Rather, I knew what was to come - war with all of the Arab armies." -Ben-Gurion

At the end of World War II, Ben-Gurion and other Zionists led the Jewish community in a successful struggle against the British. On May 14, 1948, the State of Israel was established, in accordance with the United Nations General Assembly. Israel was established with the support of the two main international powers at the time, the United States and the Soviet Union. United States President Harry Truman recognized Israel the same day, releasing the "Ross Papers" stating that America *"recognizes the provisional government as the de facto authority of the state of Israel."*

Russia believed that quickly ending British presence in Palestine could enable Moscow a faster route to spreading Communism in eastern Mediterranean countries which included Greece, Turkey, and other places in the Middle East. Gradually in the 1950s, relations between the two countries deteriorated as the Soviet Union sided with Israel's Arab foes, particularly Egypt, Syria, and Palestinian organizations.

David Ben-Gurion became the first Prime Minister of the State of Israel, the head of the cabinet and executive branch of the government. He also became the first minister of defense. Ben-Gurion emphasized the necessity of the Jewish community in Israel being united. In a battle over arms reaching Israel in June 1948, called the "Altalena Affair," Ben-Gurion made clear that he would not accept competing armies in the new state.

Immediately, Ben-Gurion had to unify the army in the Independence War against the invading Arab armies from Syria, Jordan, Iraq, and Egypt. The war ended with an Israeli victory. In the following years, Ben-Gurion played a major role in building up the nation and absorbing Jewish immigrants from around the world who moved to Israel.



Source:
National
Photo
Collection

Henry Moregenthau, former US Treasury

5. The Peres Center for Peace

"Making peace is not a simple endeavor. It is a constant struggle. But its complexity should not overshadow its purpose." -Peres



Source: Milner Moshe, National Photo Collection

In 1996, Shimon Peres founded the Peres Center for Peace and Innovation, an organization dedicated to promoting a *"prosperous Israel"* and paving the way forward *"for shared-living and lasting peace in the region."* The Center has received numerous awards since its founding, including the 2010 Peace and Sports Award for best non-governmental organization. The organization has programs in innovation, sports, cultivation of leadership and entrepreneurship, health, business, and environment.



The opening of the Peres Center for Peace

Source: Milner Moshe, National Photo Collection



Peres examining tomatoes at Sdot Negev Regional Council, near Gaza

Source: National Photo Collection

9. Later Political Life and Retirement

"It is in the Negev that the creativity and pioneer vigor of Israel shall be tested." -David Ben-Gurion



Paula & David Ben-Gurion with UN Mediator for Palestine Ralph Bunche and Ben-Gurion's youngest daughter Renana
Source: Pinn Hans, National Photo Collection

On a trip to Mitzpe Ramon, in the Negev Desert, he passed some tents and basic buildings on the side of the road. This was the beginning of Kibbutz Sde Boker. Ben-Gurion requested to visit Sde Boker, which was arranged quickly despite the security challenges in scheduling an unarranged trip.

Returning to Tel Aviv after this trip, he wrote to members of the kibbutz in Sde Boker saying, I had never

"envied a person, nor the qualities of anyone or their property. But when I visited Sde Boker I was unable to stop being jealous and envious of you: Why wouldn't I deserve to participate in a community like this?"

Ben-Gurion decided he wanted to move to Sde Boker when he retired. The members of the Kibbutz decided to accept him, despite his old age knowing that having the Prime Minister live there would greatly help their cause to build up the Negev. In late 1953, Ben-Gurion announced he would resign and moved down south to Sde Boker. Moshe Sharett became the 2nd Prime Minister in January 1954.



PM Ben-Gurion speaks at the 20th anniversary of the death of Zeev Jabotinsky | Source: National Photo Collection

Ben-Gurion returned as Defense Minister in 1955, feeling that Sharett was too moderate and worried about Arab arms buildup. This was partially a result of the Lavon Affair, a failed Israeli operation in Egypt in the summer of 1954. This divide between Sharett and Ben-Gurion grew over time.

Ben-Gurion regained control of the Mapai Party by the July 1955 elections, making him Prime Minister again in November 1955. In the years following his re-election, Ben-Gurion supported establishing relations with West Germany and lead Israel in the 1956 Sinai campaign, where Israel temporarily gained control of the Sinai.

In 1963, he stepped down from his position as Prime Minister. He remained involved in politics until 1970 as a Member of the Knesset, when he retired for good, back to Sde Boker.



David and Paula Ben-Gurion | Source: [David Shankbone](#)

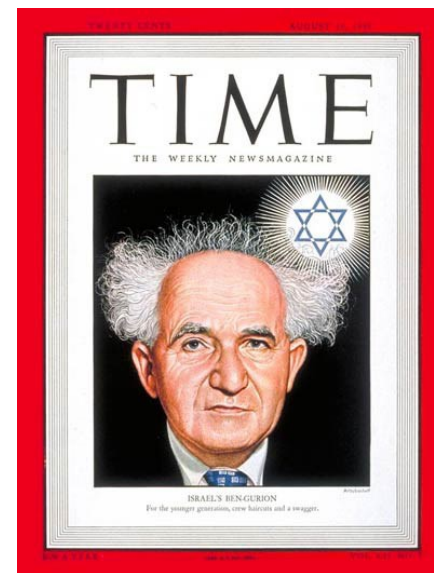
He devoted the rest of his life to writing books, which were mostly a compilation of his speeches and essays. He passed away in 1973 at 87. He is buried, together with his wife Paula Ben-Gurion, in Sde Boker.

10. Excerpts from Ben-Gurion

Statements to Knesset

November 1948

"The Israel Government is ready to begin negotiations with all Arab states, with individual Arab states, or With those states that have already concluded that there is no way of defeating Israel."



Source: public domain (the copyright was not renewed.)

1957

"The controversy is over a decisive moral question in international relations whether the United Nations, with the aid of the United States, shall apply different standards of justice, one for dictatorial Egypt and one for democratic Israel; whether those who desire to destroy us shall be allowed to disregard every international undertaking and promise, violate the U.N. Charter and the resolutions of the U.N. General Assembly and the Security Council, send murderers and saboteurs into our country, and impose an economic siege, boycott, and blockade on us while Israel is not allowed to defend itself or to protect its rights, sovereign equality, and security; whether the United Nations with the aid of the United States shall impose sanctions on us because we do not accept the double moral standard of the Egyptian dictator who demands that others fulfil everything that benefits him while he violates every bilateral agreement and international obligation which benefits others."



Source: National Photo Collection

1910

Postcard after arriving in Land of Israel

"My dear ones, Hurrah. Today at the ninth hour I alighted on the shore of Jaffa... We're going to Petah Tikvah. I'll write in more detail from there. I wasn't ill on the journey even once! I'm feeling well, full of courage, and full of faith."



Prime Minister Netanyahu at memorial ceremony for Ben-Gurion in S'de Boker (2018)

Source: National Photo Collection

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US President Harry Truman receiving a *menorah* as a gift from Ben-Gurion (center). Right: Abba Eban, Israeli Ambassador to US

Source: [public domain](#).