



**Center for Israel Education**

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**Gold Meir**

The Leadership Series

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Golda Meir posing with children of Kibbutz Shefaim (1950)  
Cover Photo Credit: Brauner Teddy, National Photo Collection

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## 1. Golda's Early Life

*"Don't be humble...you're not that great." -Golda Meir*

Golda Meir was born on May 3, 1898 in Kiev, Russia. Her parents were Moshe Mabovitch and Blume Naiditch. Her father was a skilled carpenter. She was named for her maternal great-grandmother, who apparently always had salt in her tea instead of sugar to remember the bitterness of the Jewish Diaspora. Her family immigrated to the United States when she was 8 years old in 1906, settling in Milwaukee. Meir had memories from her childhood of sitting around her family's table singing Hebrew songs.

She described her household as *"not particularly religious."* Meir's family was very poor. In Russia, her family's community experienced a high degree of anti-Semitism, emphasized by pogroms against Jews. She had vivid memories of her sister Shayna, nine years older than her, risking her life to attend Labor Zionist meetings. Golda attributed these experiences as a child contributing towards her commitment to the Jewish people and Zionism.



Golda before 1910 Source: [public domain](#).

## 2. Golda's Teenage Years

*"Above all, this country is our own. Nobody has to get up in the morning and worry what his neighbors think of him. Being a Jew is no problem here." -Golda Meir*

When she was fourteen, Golda graduated from the Fourth Street Elementary School as valedictorian. However, her parents did not want her to go to high school, wanting her to instead find a husband. Her father warned Golda that *"it doesn't pay to be too clever"* and that *"men don't like smart girls."* She defied her parents and went to North Division High School in Milwaukee.

She had to work after-school jobs to pay her expenses for school. Even after she began high school, the arguments with her parents continued. These arguments eventually led Golda to run away from home to live with her sister and brother-in-law in Denver, where she continued high school.

After school, she spent her evenings listening to Shayna's friends--anarchists, Socialist Zionists, and Labor Zionists--debate political philosophy. She also met and fell in love with Morris Myerson, a sign-painter who loved poetry and music.

Myerson did not share the same level of passion for Zionism as Golda. Her parents sent Golda a letter of apology for all their arguments with her. She returned home and graduated from high school in 1916.



Golda at age 16 in  
Milwaukee, Wisconsin

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Source: [public domain](#).



### 3. Golda's Young Adult Years

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

After graduating high school, Golda went to teaching school at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. Three times a week, she taught reading, writing, and history in a Yiddish school at the Jewish Center of Milwaukee. More informally, Golda lectured about Labor Zionism on the street corners.

She married Morris Myerson in 1917. One of Golda's preconditions for their marriage was that he promise to move to Israel with her. Golda and Morris moved to Israel in 1921, and they settled on Kibbutz Merhavyah. This area was filled with malarial swamps and Golda described it as having *"no orchards, no meadows, no flowers, nothing."*

When Golda and Morris arrived, the admissions committee rejected them--saying the kibbutz was not ready for married couples. They were shocked at being rejected and applied again. The second time, they were allowed to move on to the kibbutz, as probationary residences.

Golda worked on the kibbutz picking almonds and planting saplings, while Morris worked the fields. They were eventually accepted as full members of the kibbutz.



Golda Meir working in Kibbutz Merhavia (1920s)

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Source: [public domain](#).

## 4. Climbing the Ranks

*"Not being beautiful was the true blessing. Not being beautiful forced me to develop my inner resources. The pretty girl has a handicap to overcome." -Golda Meir*



Formal opening of Technical Training Center in Jerusalem, a US-Israeli joint program (1955)

Source: Pridan Moshe, National Photo Collection

Morris contracted malaria and refused to have children if they did not move to a city. Thus, after two and a half years on the kibbutz which Golda referred to as *"the happiest of my life,"* Golda and Morris moved to Jerusalem. In 1924, Golda gave birth to a son, Menachem and in 1926 a daughter, Sarah. Morris worked as a bookkeeper and Golda bartended to make ends meet. She also did laundry by hand for Mencahem's nursery, in exchange for his nursery school fees.

In 1928, Meir's friend David Remez offered her a position as Executive Secretary of the Women Work Council of the Histadrut, the General Federation of Jewish Labor. She took the job, despite her husband's disapproval and moved to Tel Aviv with her children and sister. Golda and Morris were now separated, with Morris staying in Jerusalem. Their separation became final ten years later, although they never legally divorced.

Over the next few years, Golda climbed the ranks and joined the Executive Committee in 1934. In 1946, Meir became the acting head of the Jewish Agency's Political Department, a Jewish organization fostering the immigration of Jews to the Land of Israel.

In 1948, Meir, who was fluent in English, travelled to the United States to raise \$25 million for an expected war with Arab neighbors over the nation's founding. Meir would return to Israel with \$50 million, showing her ability to successfully convince Americans of the necessity to provide financial support.

## 5. Golda's Role in the Founding of the State

*"You see, to me being Jewish means, and has always meant, being proud to be part of a people that has maintained its distinct identity for more than two thousand years, with all the pain and torment inflicted on it." -Golda Meir*



Prime Min. Ben-Gurion (left) welcoming Pres-elect of Costa Rica, Francisco Jose Orlich with Foreign Minister Meir

Source: National Photo Collection

Golda was a courageous woman in many different ways. In May 1948, she disguised herself as a Muslim woman and went into Jordan for a secret meeting with King Abdullah. She wanted to try convince him to keep Jordan out of the war coming with Israel. The King met with her respectfully, but failed to respond to her pleas.

Following Israel's founding as a state, Golda Meir would be involved in its leadership from the start. She served as Israel's first Ambassador to the Soviet Union, until she was appointed Minister of Labor in 1949. In this position, Golda helped those who immigrated to Israel find jobs and housing. She also served as Foreign Minister for over a decade, from 1956-1965. While her last name had been Myerson, Ben-Gurion convinced her to change it to "Meir," to better represent the Jewish state.



Golda Meir shaking hands with Moshe Sharet, Ben Gurion, and Rivkind after the signing of the Israeli Declaration of Independence

Source: Shershel Frank, National Photo Collection

## 6. Later Years in Politics

*"I have often been asked how I felt at that moment, and I wish I had a poetic answer to the question. I know that tears rolled down my cheeks and that I had my head in my hands when the voting was over, but all that I could recall about my feelings is that I was dazed. I had never planned to be prime minister; I had never planned any position, in fact...I only knew that now I would have to make decisions that would affect the lives of millions of people, and I think that is why perhaps I cried."*

*-Prime Minister Golda Meir*

In 1965, Meir decided to retire, with Abba Eban taking over her position.



Prime Minister Golda Meir with U.S. Secretary of State William James

Source: Milner Moshe, National Photo Collection

Golda was 68 years old and was excited to spend time with her grandchildren and further pursue her passions, including reading, listening to music, and baking. She had been diagnosed with lymphoma a year earlier, which she kept secret, getting treatments in the hospital only late at night.

However, her political party convinced her to come out of retirement as Secretary General of Mapai. When Prime Minister Levi Eshkol died suddenly of a heart attack in 1969, a power struggle ensued in Mapai between Moshe Dayan and Yigal Alon. As a compromise, the party leadership asked Golda Meir to become prime minister--which she accepted. She became Israel's first female prime minister. She was the 3rd woman globally to become prime minister.



Meir, Foreign Minister, meeting Sierra Leone Foreign Min. Karefa Smart in Jerusalem

Source: Pridan Moshe, National Photo Collection



## 7. Prime Minister Meir

*"A leader who doesn't hesitate before he sends his nation into battle is not fit to be a leader."*

*-Golda Meir*

Golda Meir was a well respected leader when she became Prime Minister of Israel. One of her early responsibilities as Prime Minister was to deal with the War of Attrition, along the Suez Canal on Israel's border with Egypt. Egyptian President Gamal Nassar began this war, hoping to win back control over the Sinai Peninsula, territory Israel had conquered in the Six-Day War.

This war did not lead to significant changes in the region, ending with a brokered American ceasefire, called the Rogers Plan. This led to mutual recognition of each other's independence. Another aspect of the Plan was acceptance of United Nations Security Council Resolution 242, which called for Israeli withdrawal from territory won in the Six Day War. Menachem Begin, a right wing politician who was part of the unity government until this point, opposed this deal harshly. He resigned from the coalition government following Israel's signing.



Prime Minister Meir with Colonel Robert M. Daugherty

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Source: Milner Moshe, National Photo Collection

Another important event in Meir's term as Prime Minister was her confrontation of Austrian Chancellor Bruno Kreisky over Soviet Jews' immigration to Israel. "Eagles of the Palestinian Revolution," a pro-Syrian Palestinian terror organization attacked a train full of Jews stopping in Austria. The train was on its way from the Soviet Union to Israel. The terrorists announced that unless Schoneau--a transit facility near Vienna for Jews waiting to fly to Israel--closed, the hostages would be killed. They also claimed they would violently retaliate against Austrians. The Austrian government closed Schoneau in response to the terrorists' demands.



Golda Meir, infuriated, met Austrian Chancellor Bruno Kreisky and told him that if he closed Schoneau the terrorism would never end; *“wherever Jews gather in Europe for transit to Israel they will be held to ransom by the terrorists”* (Avner, 222). This meeting did not change Kreisky’s mind and Schoneau indeed was closed. However, sadly, this was just the beginning of challenges Golda faced as Prime Minister.



Kreisky inviting Prime Minister Meir into his office in Vienna

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Source: Milner Moshe, National Photo Collection

## 8. Yom Kippur War

*“Trust yourself. Create the kind of self that you will be happy to live with all your life. Make the most of yourself by fanning the tiny, inner sparks of possibility into flames of achievement.”* -Golda Meir

On October 6, 1973, Egypt, in the Suez Canal and Syria, in the Golan Heights, surprise attacked Israel on Yom Kippur. Israeli soldiers were not prepared for this war, and most soldiers were off duty for the Jews’ holiest day of the year. Air raid sirens filled the sky, and military vehicles began assembling along the borders. Despite Meir’s assurances that Israel would be ready if war came, the IDF was in fact not ready. In the Suez Canal, 150 IDF soldiers tried unsuccessfully to stop 100,000 Egyptians from crossing the waterway.

There was a brutal and deadly battle along the northern border of Israel with Syria. The Valley of Tears Battle, fought between October 6-October 9, 1973. This was the bloodiest battle of the war in the Golan Heights, a part of northern Israel that it had captured from Syria in the Six Day War.



Golda Meir speaks to session of the World Jewish Congress in Tel Aviv

Source: Cohen Fritz, National Photo Collection

Eventually, Israel convinced American President Richard Nixon and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger of the necessity of providing military aid to Israel. Slowly but surely, this turned the war in Israel's favor. However, when it was clear that Israel had protected its borders, Nixon and Kissinger ordered that Israel stop its military campaign. The US wanted to maintain influence in the Arab world, despite its assistance to Israel during the war. Thus, Egypt was not forced to surrender, something the US wanted. This allowed President Sadat to tell the Egyptians that he had *"wiped clean the shame of 1967,"* referring to the Six-Day War.

The Yom Kippur War came at a huge cost: 2,688 IDF soldiers were killed. Israel's unpreparedness for the war led to a debate in the Knesset about whether Golda Meir had failed the nation. Begin spoke in the Knesset, angered towards Prime Minister Meir, saying rhetorically,

*"[did we] at noontime on Yom Kippur, have armor and infantry mobilized along two fronts, north and south, ready to inflict a preemptive blow on the enemy?"*

Those who had been in the reserves, as well as grieving families, were also furious at Meir. While Meir did not initially intend to resign following this uproar, she eventually succumbed to the pressure. She resigned in April 1974, leading to Yitzhak Rabin becoming Prime Minister.



Source: Milner Moshe, National Photo Collection

## 9. Golda's Passing

*"Old age is like a plane flying through a storm. Once you're aboard, there's nothing you can do. You can't stop the plane, you can't stop the storm, you can't stop time. So one might as well accept it calmly, wisely." -Golda Meir*

After Golda Meir's passing in 1978 from lymphoma, Shimon Peres eulogized Meir as *"one of the great women in Jewish and world history"* and a *"stalwart lioness."* Deputy Prime Minister Yigal Yadin described Meir's passing as a *"tragedy for the entire Jewish people."*

She had been a true leader and pioneer in building up Israel into a modern state. Israelis, regardless of their political affiliation, mourned the loss of a visionary who devoted her life to public service.



Israeli and Foreign Dignitaries attending funeral for the late Prime Minister Meir

Source: Sa'ar Ya'acov, National Photo Collection



Memorial Service in Jerusalem for Meir

Source: Amos Ben Gershom, National Photo Collection

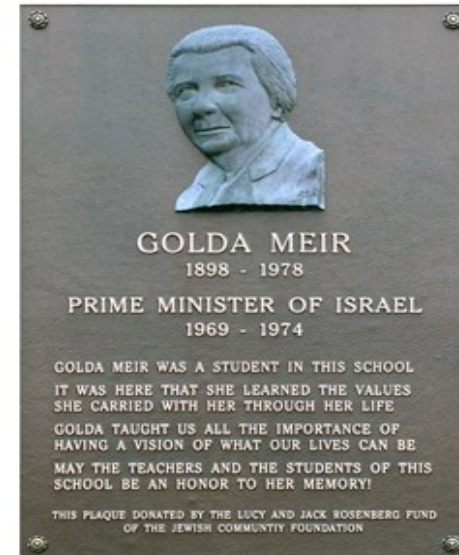


## 10. Golda's Legacy in America

In 1969, Golda visited her former elementary school in Milwaukee, Fourth Street School. Henry Kissinger, head of the National Security Council, accompanied Golda on her visit. She shared these words with the students at the school:

*"It isn't really important to decide when you are very young just exactly what want to become when you grow up. It is much more important to decide on the way you want to live. If you are going to be honest with yourself and honest with your friends, if you are going to get involved with cause which are good for others, not only for yourselves, then it seems to me that that is sufficient, and maybe what you will be is only a matter of chance."*

In 1979, the school renamed itself the Golda Meir School, in her memory.



Plaque at Golda Meir School

Source: Milwaukee Public Schools



Street named after Golda Meir in Manhattan, NY | Source: [public domain](#)

## 11. Leaders Talking about Golda



Meir with Begin & Minister  
Moshe Kol

Source: Eldan David, National Photo Collection

*"I beg of you [Rabin], please, do not misconstrue this argument between the prime minister and myself as personal. Mrs. Meir and I differ on many issues, but I want to assure you that I view her with the highest regard as a proud and courageous Jewess...To me you [Meir] were always the first among equals. But now that I have returned to the Opposition I shall have to oppose you whenever I believe you are in error, just as I did in the Knesset today. But on a personal level my respect for you shall never waver."*

-Menachem Begin (1970)

*"In many ways, it has always seemed to me, the story of Mrs. Golda Meir is the story of modern Israel. She was, as you know, born in Russia and raised in this country, where she taught in the public schools of Milwaukee. She migrated with her late husband to a primitive pioneer settlement in Palestine some 25 years ago, where she raised poultry by day and studied Hebrew and Arabic by night. And as her new homeland grew from these humble, impoverished pioneer beginnings, into a courageous and respected independent nation, so did Golda Meir rise from that impoverished poultry farm to become one of the greatest, most courageous, most respected diplomats of our time."*

-US President John F. Kennedy (1956)



Source:  
[public domain.](#)

Kennedy and Meir in  
1962

## 12. Other Notable Photos



Meir (Foreign Minister) with  
Danish Foreign Min.  
Christen Per Hakkerup

Golda Meir and Prime Minister Yitzhak  
Rabin (1974)

Sources: Cohen Fritz  
National Photo Collection

Sa'ar Yaacov  
National Photo Collection



Left to Right: Meir, Egyptian President Anwar Sadat, and Shimon  
Peres (1977)



Meir voting in 1973 elections

Source for both photos:  
Sa'ar Yaacov,  
National Photo  
Collection



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Source: [Library of Congress's Prints and Photographs division](#)

Memorial Service for former Prime Minister Meir in 2008 at Mt. Herzl Cemetery

Source: Amos Ben Gershom, National Photo Collection