Review of

Pnina Lahav's *The Only Woman in the Room: Golda Meir and Her Path to Power* (2022)

Martha Minow*

This compelling book notably gives sustained attention to the fact and impact of gender on the life and political career of Golda Meir. The first and thus far only woman to lead the Government of Israel - the first female head of government in the Middle East, and the fourth elected female head of government or state in the world - Golda Meir has been depicted in plays, films, books, and journals, but none had thoroughly focused on her femaleness. Here, the sources include photographs, Meir's own thoughts in writings and interviews, and subtle reflections by the book's author, Professor Pnina Lahav. The result is a fascinating and rigorous account of a person who learned to navigate and apply gender politics and other aspects of politics and power, while serving as an enthralling demonstration of how scholarship can bring complexity and insight to history and politics, well beyond the public record.

1. "The Only Woman" in the Title: Gender, Self-Presentation, and Policies

A glimpse of the subtle and memorable insights of the biography is offered when Prof Lahav explains the book's title, "The Only Woman in the Room." The title "not only described Golda's presence in politics, mostly alone among men in the endless meetings she attended, but also echoes David Ben-Gurion's famous saying that Golda 'was the only man in the cabinet.' The book's title turns this mostly pejorative statement on its head by arguing that in fact she was 'the only woman' in the cabinet and in meeting rooms in general."[1] When I interviewed, Golda (as she was so commonly called) criticized the phrase as sexist, implying it is better to be a man, but added, "It's a good thing I have a sense of humor."[2] Prof Lahav observes that here, Golda sublimated her irritation with humor, because her career would have suffered if she had expressed aggression.[3]

Lahav describes how Golda's presentation of herself evolved over time; and how her mother encouraged her expressions of femininity and self-confidence. Golda's mother tried to marry her off to an older man, which Golda resisted.[4] As a teenager, she even left her parents' home to join

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PNINA LAHAV, THE ONLY WOMAN IN THE ROOM: GOLDA MEIR AND HER PATH TO POWER (2022).
[2] *Id.* at 225.
[3] *Id.*
[4] *Id.* at 7-8, 16-20.

her older sister in another state, where she could attend high school—and start a relationship with a man of her choosing, a man who later became her husband.[5] Over time, Golda became an expert in deploying and resisting gender role expectations.

Early on, Golda described herself as a school-teacher—one of the few acceptable professions for a woman—she played with the stereotypes of mother and grandmother as she became a leader and[6] she played a wife-like role to her father as he hosted meetings of the tiny Poalei Zion Party.[7] As a young person working in the party's New York office, she agreed to sweep the floors, cultivated relationships with the wives and daughters of party leaders, and earned respect through her hard work.[8] Living on Kibbutz Merhavia, she requested the stereotypical role of cook, but reformed kitchen operations, improved the food and cooking processes, introduced a festive atmosphere for Shabbat meals, and stressed that all members should be proud of working in the kitchen.[9] As Israel's delegate in Russia, she cooked for the other delegation members—saving money and preparing "Yiddish food."[10] As prime minister, she served cookies and adopted a grandmotherly image.[11]

As for actually taking on the expected roles of wife and mother, she initially postponed having children and later prioritized her political work over mothering tasks. She chose work over devotion to the family, and even left a sick child at home and went to work, as men typically did.[12] Staying at home with her children suffocated her and interfered with her political and ideological goals.[13] With an unraveling marriage and a series of love affairs, she lived essentially as a single woman with children.[14] In these and in other ways, Golda defied gender expectations and acted as many men did. She also approached sexuality more like many men during her era did. She had sexual relations and apparently had an abortion outside of wedlock, and had affairs throughout her life. Lahav explains that Golda wanted freedom but had to live with conventional expectations. She had to deal with mean remarks. Some people called her "a mattress," or attributed her political rise to relationships with powerful men.[15] Prof Lahav sets the record straight and notes how Golda helped men's careers. She rose above the positions of men with whom she had been romantically

[5] *Id.* at 60-67.
[6] *Id.* at xviii, 25-27.
[7] *Id.* at 36.
[8] *Id.* at 42.
[9] *Id.* at 64.
[10] *Id.* at 130.
[11] *Id.* at 251.
[12] *Id.* at 95.
[13] *Id.* at 71.
[14] *Id.* at 79.
[15] *Id.* at 77.

involved.[16] Lahav notes that her children – who went on to their accomplished careers - appeared to understand and forgive their mother. [17]

Taking advantage of and transcending gender expectations seemed to be her strategy. She questioned women's roles, advocated opportunities for women, but also adopted a pragmatic and compromising approach.[18] She spoke and wrote about the roles of women in workplaces, families, and society, and when she had the chance, she advocated workplace benefits for pregnant women, mothers working outside the home, and restrictions of child labor. All of these are policies associated with women's traditional duties.[19] She accepted traditional gender elements even in policies such as different retirement ages for women and men under the Social Security Act.[20] Despite her own complex intimate life, she never divorced; and signed her married name when, as one of only two women, she joined the Israeli Declaration of Independence.[21] She kept a photograph of her husband on her nightstand after he passed away.[22] Lahav suggests this was partly to make amends, partly to portray herself as a widow, and partly to signal she was not available for a new marriage.[23]

Lahav brings acute perceptiveness to Golda's self-presentation , including her embrace of femininity in her childhood and early adulthood, her careful ironing of sackcloth kibbutz outfits, purchasing a white cloth for a special kerchief, and her care in selecting a female equivalent of a tuxedo (a long black gown) while serving as a diplomat from Israel in the Soviet Union.[24] She avoided glamor and embraced a grandmotherly image while accepting a male version of her official title which, in Lahav's view, reflected compromises and selecting what battles to fight.[25] Golda's pragmatism was at work when she distanced herself from the growing feminist movement in the United States while seeking support for Israel from American Evangelical leader Billy Graham, whose commitment to traditional gender roles included a rule against any men meeting alone with

[16] *Id.* at 72, 77, 203.
[17] *Id.* at 101.
[18] *Id.* at 140, 148.
[19] *Id.* at 137, 144-145.
[20] *Id.* at 144.
[21] *Id.* at 121-123.
[22] *Id.* at 79.
[23] *Id.*
[24] *Id.* at xii, xvi-xvii, 65, 128.
[25] *Id.* at 135-136. 251.

any woman other than their own wives.[26] From an early age, she learned how to be assertive while "playing nice" in a landscape marked by gendered expectations and roles.[27]

Charged with showing too much emotion in public but also widely perceived as very strong under adversity,[28] Golda Meir navigated gender expectations of leaders while serving as the first and only woman prime minister of Israel so far. She raised objections to sexism and offered sympathy to women in many circumstances, but accepted compromises in policies affecting gender distinctions.[29]

2. Influences and Choices: Biography Illuminating Leadership

Professor Lahav's gender lens is only part of her demonstration of the power of biography in shaping a leader. As Lahav indicates, Golda Meir's background as a Jewish Russian immigrant to Wisconsin in the United States helps to explain her approaches to Jewish traditions and laws and her conception of social policy, as well as her experiences and ideas about gender. Lahav also acknowledges that the combination of personality and complex unfolding events prevent the complete comprehension of reasons for Golda's actions.

Her early schooling in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, exposed her to the history of American slavery and to Wisconsin's progressive politics.[30] Lahav suggests that Golda's awareness of a Wisconsin proposal for pensions for the elderly and the American New Deal developments in social security and child labor regulation may have guided her own advocacy for social security and child labor regulation.[31] On maternity leave, she advanced a policy beyond anything that the United States had at that time: she sought a policy that left any decision about taking such leave to the individual woman while shifting the costs to the state, hence - to the society.[32]

Understanding American audiences helped her navigate the potential tensions between individual liberty and social justice.[33] And her personal and public diplomacy efforts solidified support for Israel in the United States even while Golda herself faced harsh treatment and even brutality from male leaders in both Israel and the United States.[34]

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[26] *Id.* at 255-257; ROGER E. OLSEN, *Objectifying Women and the "Billy Graham Rule"*, PATHEOS (June 12, 2022), https://www.patheos.com/blogs/rogereolson/2022/06/objectifying-women-and-the-billy-graham-rule/.
[27] Lahav, *supra*, at 37-38, 42.
[28] *Id.* at xxv, 83.
[29] *Id.* at 129, 142, 148, 150, 227.
[30] *Id.* at 17.
[31] *Id.* at 138, 145-146.
[32] *Id.* at 146-147.
[33] *Id.* at 181.
[34] *Id.* at 185-195.

Her pragmatic approach to religious practices and traditions was persistent: She agreed to religious ceremony for her wedding for both her partner's and her parents' sakes.[35] Prof Lahav associates this pragmatism in her personal life with her support for the exclusive role of rabbis and religious law in Israel family matters.[36] That she directed her male staff to learn to chant the trope for High Holidays while in the Soviet Union seemed not only pragmatic but also a tactic to connect with Russian Jewry.[37] She was particularly effective in her outreach to Jews and Jewish organizations in the United States, a critical foundation for political support for Israel.[38]

A collision between her pragmatism and her feminism seems to have been at work in her stance toward the debates in Israel over "who is a Jew?" She committed on the issue during public debates over the case of Benjamin Shalit, who wanted to register his children's as having a Jewish nationality even though the Orthodox religious law treated them as non-Jews due to their non-Jewish mother who did not wish to convert to Judaism.[39] In the face of the closely divided Supreme Court ruling that no government actor could decide who is or is not a Jew, Golda expressed sympathy for the non-Jewish mother who had chosen both Israel and Judaism for her children. Nevertheless, she ended up supporting an amendment to the Law of Return, which explicitly declared that a "Jew means a person who was born to a Jewish mother or who has converted to Judaism and is not a member of another religion."[40] Lahav suggests that Golda's decision to call for sacrifice by the mother reflected her elevation of the Zionist vision of Jewish unity and an understanding that politics requires compromises.[41] (Strikingly, as the biography nears its end, Lahav quotes Golda's comment that she had never sacrificed anything, because when you choose what you think is important, it does not involve sacrifice.)[42]

Lahav invites the reader to marvel at how Golda found strength and persistence when navigating foreign affairs and national security, preventing and winning wars, prosecuting Adolph Eichmann, strengthening an independent judiciary, and working without a staff she could trust.[43] The same

[35] *Id.* at 32-35.
[36] *Id.* at 34.
[37] *Id.* at 129.
[38] *Id.* at 179
[39] *Id.* at 236-237.
[40] *Knesset Amends the Law of Return to Define "Who Is A Jew"*, CENTER FOR ISRAELI EDUCATION (last assess) https://israeled.org/knesset-amends-law-of-return/ (describing 1950 amendment).
[41] Lahav, *supra*, at 243-245.
[42] *Id.* at 296.
[43] *Id.* at 168.

could be said about how Golda mastered poultry farming, global politics, and the logistics and economics of shipping, while handling violent demonstrations by some Mizrahi Jewish immigrants antiwar protests,[44] and humiliating public attacks.[45]

Was her resistance to have any public honors or commemorations due to internalized sexist expectations, personal insecurities, or wounds from public criticisms and personal attacks?[46] Golda Meir forbade eulogies and wanted no tributes, but they came anyway: Named after her are a center for performing arts, a highway, a library in Wisconsin, a museum in Colorado, and a retirement community in Massachusetts, This vivid, meticulous, and sympathetic biography will endure as yet another laudatory tribute.

[44] *Id.* at 66, 169, 209-211, 217.
[45] *Id.* at 169, 218-222.
[46] Lahav speculates about these reasons; *Id.* at 292-293.