"**The Only Woman in the Room**"

Laura Kalman*

I once heard a story about an Israeli man named Avraham, who knew Beatles music inside and out. All the English he knew came from them. When his apartment was dirty, he would quote from George Harrison's "While My Guitar Gently Weeps." "I look at the floor, and I see it needs sweeping," he would tell his roommate.

Likewise, everything I know about Israel comes from Pnina Lahav. Her 1997 book, *Judgment in Jerusalem: Chief Justice Simon Agranat and the Zionist Century*, focuses on a native Chicagoan steeped in the world of Brandeis and other Progressive era heroes who immigrated to Israel and became the third President of its Supreme Court. *Judgment in Jerusalem* richly illuminates the history of Israel, the history of Zionism, the history of law in Israel, and the history of justice. It remains the best biography I have ever read, one that allows the reader to watch the biographer and her subject together, each reacting to the other. It drew me into, and made me part of a dialogue between author and subject that we all knew centered around how Agranat would be remembered in history. [1]

The book's focus on Agranat's public life, instead on his relationship with family and children, made sense. An exemplary human being and judge, Agranat was a mensch reasonable people might want their daughter to marry. But Lahav tells us just enough for us to understand that few would be interested in buying a book about the marriage, and Agranat's wife wanted an intellectual biography.

In her splendid and equally extraordinary new book, *The Only Woman in the Room*, Lahav takes on another of Israel's Founders and a very different sort of subject. Golda Meir, Israel's first and only woman Prime Minister, led a fascinating and controversial personal life that was intertwined with and shaped her public one. It is a life that calls out for feminist analysis. Inspired by feminist scholarship, political historians now understand that, especially for the right subject, as William Chafe stressed in his biography of Allard Lowenstein, "the political is personal, and

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[1] PNINA LAHAV, JUDGMENT IN JERUSALEM: CHIEF JUSTICE SIMON AGRANAT AND THE ZIONIST CENTURY (1997).

the personal is political. How we behave in our public lives inevitably reflects values, attitudes and experiences embedded in our private lives, and vice versa." Thus based on three interviews, Chafe reported of Lowenstein, a sixties-era American lawyer and political activist: "His interactions with men did include orgasm—at least sometimes—but not necessarily through fondling or genital contact."[2]

Fortunately or unfortunately, depending on your perspective on whether there can ever be such a thing as too much information, Golda lived in an age that demanded more discretion. Thus when the unhappily married young mother of two began one of many affairs, with David Remez, another Israeli founder, Golda used the code word "antiquities" to refer to the private, sexual side of their relationship. "With great pleasure I read the letter on antiquities," she wrote him on one occasion, and "[i]n general, anything related to antiquities gives me a warm feeling."[3]

The Only Woman in the Room, however, is not a book about someone who slept their way to the top. To be sure, another lover, Israeli President Zalman Shazar, tapped Golda to become prime minister.[4] By focusing on how "being a woman" shaped her path to power, [5] Lahav demonstrates that Golda's dazzling ascent occurred because of the superb way she performed the daunting jobs assigned her--including coaxing money out of American Jews who relished her Progressive-era Milwaukee childhood. Further, she was very smart and a party loyalist. She understood that to succeed with men, she had to ignore their sexism; "'play nice'"—sometimes even dumb; embrace conciliation and compromise; salve her comrades' considerable egos; "and above all be helpful."[6] It had all paid off by 1946. "Sixteen years after arriving in Tel Aviv as a young, idealistic, married woman, full of dreams but with little actual knowledge about the homeland or its politics, Golda became Ben-Gurion's de facto deputy and one of the few steering the ship of state in the making."[7]

The book brilliantly shines the spotlight of gender on both Golda and Israel. The Israel of myth, where men and women worked together as equals to make the dessert bloom, was just that. Even readers familiar with the nastiest gender politics may be stunned by "the sea of misogyny"

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[2] WILLIAM H. CHAFE, NEVER STOP RUNNING: ALLARD LOWENSTEIN AND THE STRUGGLE TO SAVE AMERICAN LIBERALISM 211, 224, 506, n. 25 (New York: Basic Books, 1993).
PNINA LAHAV, THE ONLY WOMAN IN THE ROOM: GOLDA MEIR AND HER PATH TO POWER, at 74 (2022).
[4] *Id*. at 203.
[5] *Id*. at xi.
[6] *Id*. at 36.
[7] *Id*. at 117.

in which Golda swam.[8] "When a woman does not want only to give birth, to raise children…when a woman also wants to work, to be somebody…well, it's hard. Hard. Hard," an older Golda reflected to Oriana Fallaci--at the same time she also admitted that David Ben-Gurion's reported statement that she was "'the ablest man in my Cabinet'" had long irritated her.[9] (In other versions of the characterization, she was "the only woman with balls in the cabinet" and "the only woman with iron balls in the cabinet.")[10] Golda thrived because like feminists, she understood the interrelationship between public and private, personal and political. She knew, for example, how important it was to fashion herself as the nation's grandmother and to be photographed in an apron worrying about place cards for a diplomatic dinner party.[11]

Mysteriously, it turned out that she and Israel were made for each other. People reconciled themselves to a woman Prime Minister, Lahav shows, by "almost obsessively referring to her as the 'only man in the cabinet.'"[12] They yearned for strong and decisive leader after Levy Eshkol, whom many perceived as weak and vacillating, "and they could not imagine a woman possessing these qualities. Better to think of Golda as a man."[13]

But that didn't prevent the public from relentlessly attacking her. Even before Israelis made her the scapegoat for the Yom Kippur War, playwright Chanoch Levin had featured Golda in one play sitting "on the toilet as if it were her throne" and crowning herself "queen of the bathtub kingdom" while pontificating uselessly about "our desire for peace."[14] One would have thought the public would have demonstrated more respect for and loyalty to this leader so dedicated to the idea of Israel that she risked death to negotiate with King Abdullah in Transjordan in 1948. (The driver abandoned the car on the way home, and dressed in a constraining hijab, Golda and the companion who lent her legitimacy by masquerading as her husband had to complete the treacherous journey on foot).[15]

Even at the times they *liked* her, Israelis held her in a wary embrace. And when they disapproved of her, watch out! Then they transformed her into "the ultimate woman," as one critic

[8] *Id*. at 88.
[9] *Id*. at 224.
[10] *Id*.
[11] *Id*. at 117.
[12] *Id*. at 208.
[13] *Id*.
[14] *Id*. at 218-19.
[15] *Id*. at 116-20.

said, "with all her negative attributes," who became too "emotional" during the Yom Kippur War, for example, and who did not realize that war was too important to be left to the generals.[16]

Another mystery is Golda herself. Forget the fact that she "was not a good mother to her young children,"[17] for which she made amends.[18] Later she "showered them with love and attention," lived next door to her son in Tel Aviv, and spent a great deal of time at her daughter's kibbutz. [19] Her children apparently forgave her.[20] And, Lahav implies, we should too: She was simply behaving like some men who neglected their children while working their way up.

But how to explain Golda's disinterest in feminism and her reluctance to help other ambitious women? As the woman who implied to Fallaci that a stay-at-home mother did not work and was not "somebody," Golda was both product and promoter of gender inequality. In her first speech as a young party member, she maintained that women did not need their own political organization.[21] As the parent of Israel's New Deal, she ushered in Social Security, one of her many remarkable achievements—but one that enshrined the patriarchal family in much the same way American legislation did. (At least as Minister of Labor, however, Golda ushered in paid maternity leave for new mothers who worked outside the home.)[22] Later, she disparaged "second-wave" feminists as bra-burners and "repeatedly" worked to destroy the political career of one of them, the talented young Shulamit Aloni.[23] What if Golda had tried to mentor Aloni and pass along her deep understanding of politics instead, Lahav asks? [24] But she didn't, and the two treated each other with mutual contempt. Nor did Golda show much enthusiasm for mentoring other women. As Prime Minister, she appointed no women to her Cabinet.

As with all spellbinding interpretive biographies, readers are left to reach their own judgments about the subject. But one thing seems clear. To borrow from the Beatles again, it's no "long and winding road" from where Golda's life ended to where Israel is today. The country has never had another female Prime Minister. Israel remains that sea of misogyny. Paradoxically, or

[16] *Id*. at 281-82.
[17] *Id*. at 94.
[18] *Id*. at 101.
[19] *Id*.
[20] *Id*.
[21] *Id*. at 37.
[22] *Id*. at 142-43, 147.
[23] *Id*. at 136, 230.
[24] *Id*. at 235.

perhaps appropriately, it is one dotted by monuments to Golda because Israelis have finally come to recognize that she symbolized "the power to face adversity, remain resilient, and be oneself." [25]

To some of us, the country seems flawed in additional ways. Like others in her Ashkenazi elite, Golda had little use for the Mizrahi, who retaliated by launching the *mahapakh* (political upheaval) that catapulted Menachem Begin and Likud into power in 1977. And like Begin and some of her other successors, she had little use for a two-state solution. (Lahav intriguingly hypothesizes that "Golda's American education, with its focus on the American Civil War and morning pledge to 'one nation, indivisible,' played an unconscious role in forming her intuitive opposition to partition."[26]) Today, as Israel, like the United States, teeters between democracy and authoritarianism, some might question Golda's choices. Indeed, at bottom, this is the story of the idealism and utopian hopes that made Israel's birth possible and the pragmatism and lost opportunities that came with its struggle for survival. In telling it so vibrantly, Lahav never stops reminding us that the job is to explain and empathize, as well as to criticize and map the roads not taken. As ever, she is the model historian.

[25] *Id*. at 293.
[26] *Id*. at 115.