

Pnina Versus Golda?

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Boston University School of Law has the happy tradition of sponsoring panels to honor the publication of books authored by its faculty members. On April 19, 2023, it was my privilege - as the law school's Associate Dean for Intellectual Life - to organize and host a celebration of my long-time colleague Pnina Lahav's remarkable book, *The Only Woman in the Room: Golda Meir and Her Path to Power*.¹ I specifically *did not* place myself on the panel of speakers for that event, because I did not consider myself qualified to comment. I am not a regular consumer of biographies, much less biographies such as Pnina's that dig beneath the facts to theorize about broader themes in people's lives and the world around them, so I was initially reluctant to offer even a brief commentary on the book. Six months later, I am still more than a bit reluctant to do so. But Pnina was a treasured colleague for two decades, so I provide here what few thoughts I can in recognition of her outstanding achievement in this book and over the course of her distinguished career.

Unlike me, my father was an avid consumer of biographies, and I have had custody of his library since he died in 1986. Once I acquired Pnina's book, I recalled that Golda Meir's autobiography, *My Life*,² had been sitting on a bookshelf for thirty-five years (nestled between *Abba Eban: An Autobiography* and *Ben-Gurion: Prophet of Fire*). I was thus able to read *My Life* and *The Only Woman in the Room* back-to-back. Rather than attempt a traditional review of Pnina's book, I am going to offer some unconnected observations on what strike me as key differences between Golda's³ account of her own life and Pnina's take on the same events.

The most obvious difference, which I am sure other contributors to this volume will address at length and with more knowledge and background than I possess, is the role of Golda's female sex in her life story. Womanhood, and its effects on Golda's political and personal affairs, is the

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¹ PNINA LAHAV, THE ONLY WOMAN IN THE ROOM: GOLDA MEIR AND HER PATH TO POWER (2022).

² GOLDA MEIR, MY LIFE (G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1975).

³ My sense of decorum screams for me to say "Mrs. Meir" rather than "Golda," but Pnina's explanation for her own use of "Golda," is persuasive, so I follow her lead. See Lahav, *supra* note 1, at xiv-xv.

central organizing theme of Pnina’s book, both in the title and in substance. Pnina announces at the outset that she is approaching Golda’s life “through the lens of gender.”⁴ By contrast, Golda’s autobiography says relatively little on the subject, reflecting Pnina’s extensively documented account of Golda’s reluctance to emphasize sexism or sexual equality when other matters seemed – and they have always seemed – more pressing.⁵ Given such a sharp difference in focus between the two books, it is tempting to ask at this point: Whose account of Golda’s life was more accurate in this respect?

I pose that question not to try to answer it but rather to explain why it is better to resist the temptation to ask it. I offer this explanation as someone with no training whatsoever in social science, empirical methods, or any other discipline that would be useful for providing such an explanation, so please take the following comments for whatever – and however little – they are worth.

In complex human affairs, whether involving a single person or a larger group, it is seldom helpful to ask whether some variable, X or Y, played a role in those affairs is potentially worth noting. If one has taken the trouble to pose the question, so that X and Y are not obviously random factors, the answer is almost certainly “yes.” The far more interesting questions are (1) What specific context is at issue? and (2) In each specific context, *how much* of an effect on affairs did X or Y have *relative to other forces at work*? (If one is proposing changes to practices, the third interesting question would be: 3) What are the costs and benefits of altering the influence of X or Y relative to other factors?) In other words, the important questions of causality in human affairs are usually not “if” or “whether,” but “how much” and “compared to what.”

Pnina’s book does an outstanding job of dealing with the first interesting question concerning context: She consistently and thoughtfully contextualizes her discussion of sexism in Golda’s life. Whether one is talking about work in a kibbutz,⁶ international diplomacy,⁷ or wartime government management,⁸ Pnina carefully identifies and documents the existence of sexist norms that pervaded almost every circumstance of Golda’s life. The “lens of gender” in Pnina’s book is the size of the Hubble telescope.

⁴ *Id.* at xi.

⁵ Examples from Pnina’s book are too numerous to list. *See, e.g., id.* at xii, 41, 42, 45.

⁶ *See id.* at 62-64.

⁷ *See, e.g., id.* at 166-67, 183.

⁸ *See, e.g., id.* at 269-70.

But does that wide lens block out things beyond its focus? How can one assess the *magnitude* – either absolute or relative -- of sexism’s effects in each context? That is no simple task because the effects of anything in human affairs always occurs in the context of a vast range of other forces, some of which may reinforce while others may counteract whatever consequences flow from the variable at issue. Put another way, social forces are like vectors. They have both direction and magnitude, and both those vector aspects interact with numerous other vectors in any circumstance. The combined effect of those vectors defines reality. That is why predicting human affairs is so difficult – and why describing them is almost as hard. Was sexism a pervasive feature of Golda’s life? Of course it was. What, exactly, was the effect of that pervasive sexism? That is surely going to vary, perhaps widely, with context, and is going to be very hard to assess in any context with any confidence. At a minimum, one would have to look carefully at all of the other important forces that were acting on any given set of events and see how each of those other forces interacted with, ignored, or perhaps swamped other considerations, such as the sexist norms that undeniably existed.

To be clear, I am *not* criticizing Pnina for failing to attempt what I would regard as the near-impossible task of making verifiable assessments of the relative impact of various social vectors on Golda’s life. That was not the book that Pnina set out to write. Indeed, this observation is not really a comment on Pnina’s book at all but rather a general call to be wary of overconfidence when making causal claims about human affairs. As it happens, Pnina is actually not guilty of that overconfidence. To the contrary: When she speculates about the likely effects of sexism in this or that circumstance of Golda’s life, she makes it very clear that she is speculating rather than making strong causal claims. Those speculations are consistently intuitively plausible and based on some measure of hard data. They are well grounded speculations, and I am not in any way objecting to their inclusion in a biography. I am only urging readers not to leap too far beyond what the material, by its nature, can sustain. It would not surprise me if Pnina agreed with that cautionary note.

A second difference between Pnina’s and Golda’s books that leaps out is the treatment of Golda’s wartime governance. Pnina’s book contains a short chapter and part of another on the Yom Kippur War,⁹ which pales before the detailed treatment provided in *My Life*.¹⁰ Golda offers thirty-

⁹ See *id.* at 264-80.

¹⁰ See Meir, *supra* note 2, at 420-53.

four pages on the Yom Kippur War to Pnina’s seventeen – and I believe the divergence is significantly larger than two-to-one if one goes by word count, as Golda’s book has much smaller print.

For several reasons, this difference in emphasis is hardly surprising. First, Golda’s account of the war devotes much time to military strategy, diplomacy (especially regarding relations with the United States), and the agonizing decisions that any leader must make during wartime. Those matters, while historically important, do not provide much material for a feminist lens, so they do not seem like obvious subjects for detailed treatment in Pnina’s book. Second, precisely because those events have been detailed elsewhere, perhaps Pnina did not think that she had much to add to what had already been said about Golda’s wartime decisions as Prime Minister.¹¹ Again, I am not in any way criticizing Pnina for not devoting “enough” time to the Yom Kippur War; there is no such thing as “enough” outside the specific context of a book’s project, and for the reasons just given, the war is a topic that, while central to the history of Israel and Golda, is not as vital to the specific story that Pnina intends to tell. I merely find it interesting to observe the vastly different treatment that two authors give to the subject of wartime command, with no judgments intended or implied by the observation.

A third obvious difference is the way the two books handle Golda’s personal relationships and failed marriage. Golda’s only serious discussion of her failed marriage to Morris Meyerson focuses on her decision in 1928 to accept the position of secretary of the Histadrut’s *Moetzet Hapoalot*, which required her to move from Jerusalem to Tel Aviv:

"I had to face the fact that going back to work would spell the end to my attempts to devote myself entirely to the family I told myself that perhaps if I were happier and more fulfilled, it would be better for everyone -- for Morris, for the children and for me

"It didn’t work out quite that way, of course [A]lthough Morris and I remained married to each other and loving each other until the day he died . . . , I was not able to make a success of our marriage after all. The decision I took in

¹¹ One could also note as a third respect that Golda’s book as a whole is simply much longer than Pnina’s, so comparisons of pages or words in any context may not be very meaningful.

1928 actually marked the start of our separation, although it didn't become final for almost ten years."¹²

According to this story, the marriage broke up simply because Golda was too devoted to her work to concentrate on her family.

Once one then reads Pnina's book (I read Golda's first because I thought it would give me background for understanding Pnina's), the story becomes far more complicated, as we learn about Golda's multiple affairs.¹³ Golda's autobiography makes no mention of her affairs or her lovers. None. Evidently, those affairs were well known to the public, and commonplace among major political figures who were her contemporaries throughout Golda's life in Palestine and Israel, so it is not as though Golda was concealing a great or dark secret by omitting mention of them in her book. This is an enormously significant part of Golda's life that is utterly absent from her autobiography; indeed, it is an omission large enough to call into question the accuracy of the very *title* of Golda's book. Can we really say that we read about her "Life" if all we read was *My Life*? In some ways, the treatment of Golda's personal life in the two books marks an even more striking difference than the books' varying approaches to sexism.

I do not want to speculate about why Golda would choose to offer so misleading an account of such important aspects of her life as her marriage and personal relationships. Perhaps there are enough differences between 1975 and 2022 so that no explanation is needed. Maybe *My Life* was aimed at an American audience that would not necessarily be privy to all that was commonly known in Israel and that might have reacted to it differently than would audiences in other places. Once again, I offer no judgment on either Golda or Pnina for their literary choices on this delicate subject. I just found the difference interesting.

When I was growing up, Golda Meir was a near-legendary figure in my family's Jewish community (in the area around Seattle, Washington). I now realize how little we actually knew about her, other than that she was Prime Minister during epochal times. I am grateful to Pnina Lahav for spurring me to take a closer look at one of the twentieth century's most important personalities. Pnina brought to that task her characteristic insight and thoughtfulness. I am glad to have had the opportunity to read her book and to serve on a faculty with Pnina Lahav for the past twenty years.

¹² *Id.* at 112.

¹³ See Lahav, *supra* note 1, at 72-76, 78-79, 91.