When Golda Meir Was in Africa

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From the late 1950s until the early 1970s, Israel engaged in a massive diplomatic campaign in Sub-Saharan Africa, befriending the young African nations just liberated from colonial rule. Thousands of Israeli experts were sent to 33 independent African states, offering aid and technical knowledge in fields such as military training, regional planning, agriculture, medicine, legal work, and community services. Even experts from Mifal Ha’pais, Israel’s state lottery, went to Africa. At the same time, thousands of Africans traveled to Israel to participate in training programs. All this made the 1960s the “golden age” of Israeli-African relations.

The huge scale of the project is astounding when we remember that Israel itself was still a young country, struggling with harsh social and economic problems. But Israel also faced a difficult diplomatic isolation. Consequently, Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion and Foreign Minister Golda Meir decided to approach friendly states in the “second circle”—that is, beyond the first circle of hostile Arab countries. In November 1956, the first Israeli embassy in Africa opened in Accra, Ghana. In 1958, Golda Meir toured West Africa (the first in a series of several extended visits), attending the first anniversary of Ghana’s independence and meeting the new African leaders of the Ivory Coast, Senegal, and Nigeria. As Meir explained in her autobiography, My Life (1975), the independent African states recognized similarities between Israel’s national struggle and their own:

Like them, we [Israelis] had shaken off foreign rule; like them, we had to learn for ourselves how to reclaim the land, how to increase the yields of our crops, how to irrigate, how to raise poultry, how to live together and how to defend ourselves. [...] We couldn’t offer Africa money or arms, but on the other hand, we were free of the taint of the colonial exploiters because all that we
wanted from Africa was friendship. Let me at once anticipate the cynics. Did we go into Africa because we wanted votes at the United Nations? Yes, of course […]. But it was far from being the most important motive […]. The main reason for our African “Adventure” was that we had something we wanted to pass on to nations that were even younger and less experienced than ourselves.

And she concluded: “We went to Africa to teach, and what we taught was learnt” (318–9).

Meir’s narrative suggests how Israel’s African “Adventure” exposes some of the tensions and contradictions that typify Zionist ideology—first and foremost, the difficulty of defining Zionism’s place within the histories and legacies of European colonialism. On the one hand, Zionism had a powerful anti-colonial dimension. Political Zionism emerged in the 1890s as a movement for the liberation of oppressed subjects. This was acknowledged by leaders of the Pan-African movement (such as Edward Blyden) who recognized a deep affinity between Jewish and African nationalism. Later, in 1940s Palestine, the Jews’ struggle against British rule resembled similar resistance movements in Asia and Africa: the British retreat in 1948, which paved the way for an independent Jewish state, was part of a broader process of decolonization. This anti-colonial struggle became central to Israeli self-fashioning, visible in Meir’s account. Significantly, throughout the 1960s, Israel steadfastly criticized the apartheid regime in South Africa. Meir considered it her duty as a Jew to oppose racial discrimination and oppression.

On the other hand, alongside its anti-colonial elements, Zionism was indebted to colonial vocabularies, practices, and institutions. Theodor Herzl’s Zionist plans both relied on and reflected colonial imagery, from his idea of founding a Jewish colonial bank to his diplomatic success in securing the 1903 “Uganda Proposal” (Britain’s offer to establish an autonomous Jewish protectorate in East Africa). Zionism’s pact with the British Empire, epitomized in the Balfour Declaration (1917), eventually facilitated the founding of Israel in 1948; and the Arabs who became Israeli citizens lived under strict military rule until 1966—a condition not unrelated to colonial control. Indeed, Jewish attitudes towards Arabs (as well as Ashkenazi Jews’ opinions of Mizrahi Jews) often reflected colonial tropes. This appears in Golda Meir’s account of Israel’s civilizing mission, which distinguishes between those whose duty is to teach and those who must learn. Paraphrasing Rudyard Kipling’s famous—perhaps infamous—phrase, we could call this, “the white Jew’s burden.”

Unless we acknowledge this fusion of colonial, anti-colonial, and post-colonial features, we cannot do justice to the complexity of Zionist history and ideology, nor can we
fully understand Israel’s work in Africa. It is no coincidence that Golda Meir became the most celebrated icon of Israel’s African “Adventure”: this status is rooted not only in Meir’s long tenure as foreign minister but also in her public image, which embodied these broader tensions.

Gender primarily defined the complexity of Meir’s public persona. As Israel’s most senior female politician and prime minister (from 1969 to 1973), Meir was often represented as tough, merciless, even masculine (for example, when dubbed “the only real man in the government”). But she was equally known for her emotional and sentimental responses, typical of a Jewish mother. No wonder her hosts at one Ivory Coast reception had the local band greet her with a stirring rendition of “My Yiddishe Momme.”

In Africa, this fusion of gender categories appeared as well in racial terms. Both Israelis and Africans depicted Meir as the quintessential “white mother,” an image not unlike that of Queen Victoria, known in 19th-century Africa as the “Great White Queen.” The analogy between the two women is intriguing: both were often identified by their first name only; worked for decades in the public arena without a spouse beside them; and both left a lasting impression because of the supposed discrepancy between their unassuming appearance and their enormous political power. Like Victoria, Golda Meir (“the uncrowned queen of Israel,” as one biographer called her) also embodied a missionary-like zeal of bringing “light” to the “darkness” of Africa.

Nevertheless, whereas Victoria’s whiteness was never compromised, Golda Meir assumed an honorary African identity of sorts. In 1958, for example, she was made a “permanent chief” of the Gola tribe in Liberia. Meir was certainly not the only foreign (or even Israeli) dignitary to receive this honor, but she somehow looked particularly at ease wearing local robes and holding a ceremonial chicken; so much so that Israeli poet Avraham Shlonsky joked that the Gold Coast (the British colonial name for Ghana) could now be renamed, “Golda Coast.” Africans were taken by her warmth and candor; they commended Meir for her rare dancing abilities and sometimes named their daughters “Golda.” During a visit to Ghana, Meir was sitting under an enormous mango tree and combing her hair, when “ten or eleven little girls appeared who had apparently never seen long hair before. One little girl, braver than the rest, came up to me. I could see that she wanted to touch my hair, so for the next half hour I let them take turns combing it and didn’t even notice the crowd of awestruck Africans who had gathered behind me” (327–8).

The acclaimed African American writer Alice Walker ridiculed this scene in a poem entitled “When Golda Meir Was in Africa” (1979). Traveling around the world, writes Walker, Meir looked like any other grandmother. In Africa, however, she could finally settle down and comb her hair: “The children crept up and stroked it,/And she felt beautiful.” Referring to the breakup of Israeli-African diplomatic ties in 1973, Walker’s Golda Meir sees the Africans as childish, arrogant, and treacherous—a great disappointment to Israel.

Meir certainly acquired a reputation for self-righteousness, and her sometimes condescending attitude towards Mizrahi Jews, who had immigrated to Israel from North Africa. We can also trace the familiar gap between those who teach and those who learn—or, in this case, between those who let down their hair and those who come to stroke it. Still, Walker’s caricature fails to recognize the real sense of friendship and affection that emerged under that mango tree in Ghana. Without this side of the story, we cannot truly understand what happened, and why, when Golda Meir went to Africa.