

Robert St. John

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

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# BEN-GURION

*the biography of  
an extraordinary man*



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ONE WEEK during 1957 newspapers and magazines from Paris to Brisbane carried pictures of Israel's Prime Minister standing on his head on a sandy beach near Tel Aviv.

Some people assumed it was a hoax. Even when the photographs were greatly enlarged, the features were not distinct. It might have been *any* short, stocky, white-haired man. Besides, those who knew David Ben-Gurion best were aware that he had never been interested in gymnastics, calisthenics, or any other form of physical exercise. Furthermore, he was past seventy and for several years had not been well.

But it *was* David Ben-Gurion, and behind the photographs there was a story that was never completely disclosed.

Soon after the War of Liberation, Israel's Ministry of Defense invited Moshe Feldenkrais, who had spent ten years in Palestine as a boy and then had gone to France and England and become a scientist, to return and head its electronics department.

Feldenkrais is a man of many interests. For years he worked with the Curie family on radium. At the same time he became a personal pupil of Jigoro Kano, the judo expert, was awarded the first judo black belt in Europe, and founded the Jiu Jitsu Club of France. When the Germans approached Paris, he moved to England. There he served in a scientific capacity with a submarine detection unit. When Britain was beleaguered and her Home Guards were protecting the island, armed in some cases with nothing more lethal than wooden clubs, Feldenkrais wrote a small book, *Practical Unarmed Combat*, which showed the Home Guardsmen how to disarm an attacker with their hands.

Feldenkrais described judo as "the art of the highest and most efficient use of mental as well as physical energy directed to the accomplishment of a definite purpose." He then went into deeper studies of how to train the body to submit to the personality, and how to deal with an immediate task without being handicapped by old habits of thought or attitude.

One of his nine books, *Body and Mature Behaviour*, is a study of anxiety, sex, gravitation, and learning, in which he asserts that

emotional instability and behavior disorders are connected with indigestion, faulty breathing, crooked toes, unsatisfactory sexual experiences, postural rigidity, and muscular tension, and that the solution is physical re-education.

In England he worked with people who had both physical and emotional difficulties, and found he could help them. But he had the opposition of a conventional and well-organized medical profession.

In Israel, a young country that still believed in "the impossible," physicians were suspicious but not antagonistic. Before long he had so many patients that he had to abandon his work in electronics.

It was Professor Aaron Katchalski of the Weizmann Institute who brought Feldenkrais to the attention of the Prime Minister.

To Ben-Gurion, Feldenkrais' ideas were provocative and stimulating.

"The average brain is like the sky," he told the Prime Minister, "practically empty. A normal brain can absorb up to seventy languages, and an experienced conductor may know by heart dozens of operas and as many symphonies. There is room in the conductor's head for sixty-eight or sixty-nine more languages and in the linguist's for all the operas and symphonies.

"The man we call a genius uses only 5 per cent of the human being's innate mental capacity."

About man's misuse of his body he said to Ben-Gurion:

"We walk like badly made puppets instead of like kings of creation."

Ben-Gurion knew, from his reading, about Yoga exercises and the theory that man can make intellectual and spiritual progress through control of the body. Still, he was somewhat skeptical.

"I want proof," he told his visitor.

Feldenkrais offered him either a list of his patients, copies of his books, testimonial letters, or a few sample lessons.

"I'll read one of your books," the Prime Minister decided.

A few days later he sent for Feldenkrais.

"How many lessons will it take?"

"Ordinarily one lesson a week for a year is enough," Feldenkrais said. "But I have never had a pupil over seventy before. You may be too old to change your ways."

But Ben-Gurion wanted to try, so they agreed on a one-hour lesson at the end of his office routine each day.

During the first exercise Ben-Gurion was instructed in how to lie on his back on the floor with his eyes closed, raise one leg and turn it slowly in half circles, concentrating intently on the movements he was making.

As Feldenkrais studied his new pupil he realized that, despite the pains in his back, he made certain movements with the perfection of a tightrope walker, indicating a high degree of integration already.

After the second lesson the Prime Minister said:

"Maybe you have something. For months I have had such pain in my hip joints that I wake up every fifteen minutes during the night. But last night I slept for several hours."

This did not change Paula's opinion. She had been unimpressed from the start, and had nicknamed the teacher "Mr. Hokus-Pokus." She told him bluntly that she thought he was wasting a lot of her husband's valuable time with "all this monkey business of yours."

Just when Ben-Gurion seemed to be making progress in the control of his body he went on a military inspection trip by motorboat on the Gulf of Aqaba and came back with a severe cold. Then he went to Jerusalem, where the temperature was below freezing, to address an emergency cabinet meeting, and his condition grew worse.

One evening when Feldenkrais arrived at No. 17, Paula greeted him more caustically than usual.

"*Shalom*, Mr. Hokus-Pokus. You can't see him tonight. The doctor says he has pneumonia."

Ben-Gurion, hearing them, called from his room:

"If that's Feldenkrais, I want to talk to him."

Instead of the usual work, the teacher proposed some exercises in proper breathing.

Paula stood by protectingly.

"You mustn't make him work tonight. He's sick."

"I am sure I can bring down his temperature."

Paula laughed.

"I used to be a nurse and I don't believe it."

So they made a wager. Paula took the patient's temperature, and then Feldenkrais began the exercises.

After ten minutes they took his temperature again. It had dropped a full degree Fahrenheit. But by this time he was annoyed.

"Go away and leave me alone."

After several weeks he was well enough to return to his routine of daily lessons.

The first three months of 1957 were a time of continuous crisis. As more and more pressure was put on Israel to withdraw from the Gaza strip and the Gulf of Aqaba, "emergency" cabinet meetings became routine, nearly all cables were marked "urgent," and everyone was under strain. Yet Ben-Gurion issued instructions that nothing was to interfere with his daily engagement with Feldenkrais.

Once, halfway through a critical cabinet meeting, he looked at his watch and realized it was time for his exercise.

"I am sorry," he said, "but we will have to take a recess. I will be back in exactly an hour."

The only time an exercise was interrupted was one day when Argov knocked at the door and said:

"Excuse me, but an important message has just arrived from President Eisenhower."

Sometimes the Prime Minister and his instructor would talk about psychology and ethics. One day Feldenkrais said:

"The well-integrated man never acts without the ability to reverse himself. No decision is important unless the person making it has been thinking all the time of the possibility of making exactly the opposite decision."

This started a long discussion, for Ben-Gurion was faced at this time with the necessity of making one more grave decision: whether to give in to international pressure and withdraw his troops from Gaza and the Gulf of Aqaba.

Feldenkrais would never know what strange new subject the Prime Minister was going to introduce. One evening he said:

"You are a specialist in electronics, so tell me, can an electronic machine ever be built which will perform all the functions of the human brain? Is the brain really a machine? Or is there a value of some sort which can never be mechanically reproduced?"

Paula had many objections to the exercises.

"I don't like people who are too much interested in themselves. You are making my husband too conscious of how he stands, how he walks, how he sits."

But gradually, as she saw that it was improving his health, she dropped her objections, and eventually sent a number of patients to "Mr. Hokus-Pokus."

For months President Ben-Zvi, who came in by chance during an exercise, was the only one besides Paula, Professor Katchalski, and personal secretaries who knew exactly what was happening during the mysterious hourly visits of the electronics expert.

The secret might never have leaked out had it not been that Feldenkrais made a trip abroad. Just before he left Israel he had been working with Ben-Gurion on how to drive fear out of the body by more acute awareness. One of the exercises was a headstand. The Prime Minister was able to do it on a bed, but did not yet have the control to do it in the middle of a floor.

Several weeks later Feldenkrais opened a London newspaper and saw a photograph of his pupil executing a perfect headstand. He put in a telephone call for Tel Aviv and learned that Ben-Gurion had been at the Sharon Hotel at Herzlia on the sea and had decided that a secluded sandy beach would be a good place to practice his exercises.

"I thought the beach would be soft like a bed, but extensive like the floor of a room. And it worked. I had no idea anyone ever saw me."

The photographer was unobserved because he was working with a telephoto lens. He sold the two photographs he took to magazines and papers all over the world, and they were more widely printed than any of the hundreds of other photographs taken during the years of Ben-Gurion's prominence.

The wisdom of standing on the head became a subject of cocktail conversation, although many people misunderstood the purpose of the exercise.

"Standing on the head," Feldenkrais explained, "is not an aim in itself. It is merely one of a hundred ways of getting to know oneself thoroughly; a road to greater awareness. After it has served that purpose, there is no use in continuing to do it."

An Indian doctor visiting in Israel was asked whether it was a healthful exercise.

"I do not know whether it is healthful, but I know that only a very healthy man can do it."

This was the first year since Ben-Gurion's youth that he had had no physical troubles of any kind, except having some teeth and some assassin's bullets extracted.

He stopped wearing his "corset," no longer had trouble getting in and out of automobiles, lost surplus weight, and could get up from a prone position on the floor with the agility of a young man.

Once when he was tying a shoelace standing on one foot, he laughed and said:

"It has been thirty years since I've been able to do that."

One day, accompanied by several aides, he went to call at the Tel Aviv offices of the committee planning the tenth anniversary celebration.

"What floor are the offices on?" he asked.

"The fourth."

"The rest of you ride in the elevator. I'll walk."

When they all reached the fourth floor, an aide told him that he had disappointed the elevator operator, who had wanted the honor of serving him.

"All right. I'll ride down with him then."

Few statesmen in the world have been under such pressure as Ben-Gurion was during the first nine weeks of 1957.

In defiance of the Soviet Union, the United States, the United Nations, and the Communist party of Israel, he was refusing to withdraw troops from either the Gaza strip or the Straits. He was playing a game with no diplomatic weapons, no allies (except perhaps France), nothing to threaten, no chance to bluff.

He was the leader of fewer than two million people, facing the spokesmen for most of the other 273,000,000. He was even defying the United Nations, which had created Israel. But except for a handful of local Communists, his own people were united behind him, and he was certain that he had justice on his side.

Perhaps he might eventually have to back down, but he felt that the longer he drew out the war of nerves the better his

chance of convincing the world that Israel, the only nation denied the use of the Suez Canal, at least should have the right to send her ships in and out of her own Red Sea port of Elath, and that she should be permitted to keep the Egyptians from using Gaza as a launching site for more deadly Fedayeen raids.

The United Nations passed six resolutions calling on Israel to withdraw from the occupied territory.

President Eisenhower sent six strong letters. He cut short a holiday and rushed back to Washington to make a broadcast, warning Israel of what might happen to her if she failed to cooperate.

Eban and Mrs. Meir were shuttling back and forth between Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, New York, and Washington.

Sometimes as many as three cabinet meetings were held in a single day.

For the first time since the Sinai invasion there was disagreement among the ministers when a vote was taken.

A break in the international deadlock finally came in February when Eban had a three-hour talk with Dulles, who said the United States agreed with Israel about a United Nations administration in Gaza and freedom of shipping in the Gulf of Aqaba.

The Ambassador cabled Jerusalem, and Ben-Gurion ordered the Cabinet rounded up at once. Motorcycle policemen were sent racing down highways after the ministers. One was summoned by a message flashed on a Jerusalem movie screen.

"There comes a time," he told them, "when you can get the maximum in your struggle, but if you miss that moment the opportunity may not come again."

The Cabinet debated until 2 A.M. At last a vote was taken. There were four against him, but he decided to proceed anyway.

The ministers went home. Ben-Gurion stayed at his desk for another hour drafting instructions to Eban and Mrs. Meir.

Mrs. Meir spent the day in conferences in Washington. Then she wrote the announcement she would make to the U.N. and cabled it back home for approval.

On Friday the Cabinet met at 3 P.M. The arguing went on until after the rise of the evening star, which signaled the start of the Sabbath. This disturbed the two ministers representing the