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HISTORY

Shabtai Teveth and the Whole Truth

MARTIN KRAMER / JAN. 20, 2015

Longtime readers of COMMENTARY might remember Shabtai Teveth, prolific author and the authorized biographer of David Ben-Gurion. Teveth passed away on November 2 at the age of eighty-nine. He had gone silent twelve years earlier, following a debilitating stroke. It was on the pages of COMMENTARY, in 1989, that he launched one of the most thorough **broad-sides** on Israel's "new historians." It repays reading now (as does Hillel Halkin's COMMENTARY **review** of Teveth's *Ben-Gurion and the Holocaust*). It's also a reminder of how desperately Israel still needs truth-tellers like Teveth, who knew the flaws of Israel's founders perfectly well, but never let that overshadow the nobility of their cause.

By the time I met Teveth, in the early 1980s, he was already renowned for his journalistic achievements at *Haaretz*, but also for his best-selling books, most famously his up-close account of the heroic armored battles of the June 1967 Six-Day War. (It appeared in English under the title *The Tanks of*

Tammuz.) Approaching sixty years of age, he had set aside journalism in order to devote himself to a monumental biography of David Ben-Gurion, a project he had commenced some years earlier, when the Old Man was still alive and willing to talk.

I was new in Israel, and the native-born Teveth became a friend and my guide to the intricacies of the country's history, politics, and journalism. In return, I helped him to prepare an English edition of a spin-off of his biographical project: a book eventually entitled *Ben-Gurion and the Palestinian Arabs*, published by Oxford in 1985. In that work, Teveth argued that Ben-Gurion perfectly understood Arab opposition to Zionism, but also recognized the danger of acknowledging its depth. So he conducted a carefully calibrated policy that held out the hope of a peaceful settlement, even while preparing for confrontation. The book covered the 1920s and 1930s, but Ben-Gurion would implement the same approach right up to 1948.

Work on the book became a kind of tutorial course on the history of Israel, taught to me by Teveth. In turn, I taught him some of the odder subtleties of English. For years afterwards, he would call me at some ungodly hour of the morning, to ask how he might best render this or that Hebrew phrase into polished English without sacrificing even an iota of its original meaning.

Teveth wrote like a journalist up against a deadline. He would rise very early, go for a swim, head for his office (he didn't work at home, but kept a separate apartment filled to the brim with his research materials), and then would bang out a few thousand words on his typewriter before lunch. I don't think he ever had a day of writer's block. Over the years, we developed a regular routine. Perhaps once a month, we would meet for lunch in a restaurant somewhere in north Tel Aviv where he kept his office. By lunchtime, Sabi (as his family and friends called him) had finished a full day's work, and he was primed for competitive conversation, usually smoothed by a glass of Scotch, for which he had a refined taste. I couldn't return all of his volleys, and the only real match he had in conversation was the late **Zvi Yavetz**, the historian of ancient Rome and a master raconteur in his own right. When Sabi and Zvi got rolling, showering the table with sparks of erudition and wit, the spectacle inspired awe and envy.

I once asked Sabi why he had set journalism aside, since his *Haaretz* columns had landed on the breakfast tables of the most influential people in Israel. His many books, prior to the Ben-Gurion project, had been contemporary reportage of the highest order, attracting large numbers of readers. (These included a biography of Moshe Dayan, a book on the first years of Israel's post-1967 policies in the West Bank, and an exploration of poverty in Israel.) Sabi answered that he didn't

want to spend an entire lifetime breathing heavily over the doings of politicians.

The older I grow, the more I appreciate that decision to move from punditry to history. Teveth came to recognize the ephemeral nature of most journalism. He believed he was fortunate to have witnessed the last chapter in the founding of Israel (as a young soldier in the Palmach and then as an army journalist), and that this was a story that would be told again and again by future generations, each time from a point still more remote from the events. If he wrote that history now, meticulously and honestly, that telling would last beyond him.

The Ben-Gurion project, which ultimately reached four volumes (3,000 pages) in Hebrew, belongs to the genre of the big-canvas biography, of the sort exemplified by Robert Caro's study of Lyndon Johnson or Martin Gilbert's official biography of Winston Churchill. Indeed, it was Teveth's finest hour in 1987 when the 967-page English version of the Ben-Gurion biography (pre-1948) received a glowing **review** from Gilbert on the front page of the *New York Times Book Review*, accompanied by a photograph as well as a short profile of Teveth (written by Tom Friedman). This was before the Internet, and I remember rushing over to Sabi's home to see the review section, urgently dispatched by his New York publisher.

The Friedman profile includes an odd quote. “Israel has been going through a difficult period during these last thirteen years,” Teveth told Friedman. “But all this time I feel as though I have been working in a bunker full of light and hope. In my bunker the Jewish state is yet to be born. The Jewish people have a strong leader and the world is huge.” I personally never heard Sabi talk of his historical work as a nostalgic retreat from contemporary Israel. He regretted the diminished quality of Israel’s leaders, but this only fortified his determination to remind Israelis of a moment in living memory when they had a leader equal to world history at its most demanding.

There had been a leader who might have risen to that stature: Moshe Dayan, Ben-Gurion’s favorite, who seemed poised to succeed the Old Man as the very personification of Israeli grit. Teveth had written a biography of him—admiring but not reverential—that appeared in 1971, while Dayan still basked in the glow of the Six-Day War. Dayan’s prospects were dashed by the Yom Kippur War in 1973, when suddenly he became the clay-footed personification of Israeli hubris. Teveth nevertheless remained loyal to Dayan, and it was he who mediated between Dayan’s longtime admirers and Tel Aviv University, to bring forth the Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies.

The monumental biography of Ben-Gurion secured for

Teveth the National Jewish Book Award in 1987 and the Israel Prize, Israel's highest civilian honor, in 2005. But the project remained unfinished, in part because every few years he would suspend it to write a spin-off. He wrote a book on the 1933 murder of Chaim Arlosorov. (Its conclusions so enraged then-prime minister Menachem Begin that he appointed an official commission of inquiry to refute it.) He wrote another book on Ben-Gurion's response to the Holocaust, and still another on the 1954 Lavon Affair (both also appeared in English). And there was that book on Ben-Gurion and the Palestinian Arabs. These digressions, while important works in their own right, took time from the biography, and when Teveth suffered his stroke, he hadn't yet gotten to the year for which Ben-Gurion's life had been a preparation: 1948.

We are fortunate, then, that one of those digressions took the form of a direct confrontation with the so-called “new historians.” Avi Shlaim, one of Teveth's targets, later **called him** “the most strident and vitriolic” critic of the self-declared iconoclasts who set about smashing the conventional Israeli narrative with reckless abandon. In the spring of 1989, Teveth fired off a barrage of full-page critiques in three consecutive weekend editions of *Haaretz*. (These pieces formed the nucleus of his later COMMENTARY article.) Teveth pummeled the “new historians” (Shlaim and Benny Morris), whose indictments of Israel's conduct in 1948 he

described as a “farrago of distortions, omissions, tendentious readings, and outright falsifications.” I recall waking up early each Friday morning and rushing down to my doorstep to grab the newspaper and flip to that week’s installment.

A year later, he published a 35-page **review** of Benny Morris’s *Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem*, pursuing error and bias into the most remote footnotes. This was Teveth at his forensic best: he had read the same documents in the same archives, and he showed that they did not always say what Morris claimed they said. “Morris’s work was received with great expectations,” Teveth concluded. “On examination, however, these have been disappointed. This problem [of how the Palestinian Arabs became refugees], therefore, will have to wait still further for a more comprehensive and honest study, that would be worthy of the great human and national tragedy it represents.”

The “new historians” retaliated by trying to label Teveth as “old.” True, he was a generation older than them, but the “old”-naming could reach absurd proportions. For example, Shlaim once **described** him, repeatedly, as a “member of the Mapai old guard.” Nonsense: Teveth was famously associated with Mapai’s *young* guard, and indeed **built** his journalistic reputation as a muckraker by attacking Mapai’s veteran party stalwarts.

Teveth concluded his COMMENTARY article by dismissing

the “new historians,” since “history, thank goodness, is made of sterner and more intractable stuff than even their wholesale efforts of free interpretation can dissimulate.” This proved to be overly optimistic. Demolishing Israel’s “myths” and creating new ones turned into a popular pastime for younger academics and activists. Benny Morris’s book on the Palestinian refugee problem has become the most-read and most-cited book on the 1948 war. One hardly need wonder what Teveth would say about the latest **iteration** of “free interpretation” (pioneered by Morris in the revised edition of his book), accusing Israel of various massacres that somehow escaped notice until just now. Nothing good, I imagine.

I wish I could announce that Teveth’s legacy will be ever-enduring, but a younger generation of readers will have to discover him first, and that hasn’t happened yet. He wrote mostly in the era before the Internet, so his most important writings aren’t accessible at a click. He disappeared from the scene years before he died, so the obituaries were few and perfunctory. And he wrote big books that almost no one has read cover-to-cover. Teveth not only told truths about Israel, he told *whole* truths, and that required a minute retrieval and examination of *all* the evidence. There were reviewers who **complained** that Teveth left his readers “drowning in a sea of detail,” and that “intimate descriptions of daily doings” caused them to lose the “overall thread.”

Teveth was familiar with the criticism, and he rejected it. At one point, he had recited the list of groceries Ben-Gurion purchased while in London in November 1938. “Trivial,” he acknowledged, “yet how well this information helps the biographer in describing the loneliness of Ben-Gurion, who ate in his hotel room and there listened to the radio speeches by Hitler and Chamberlain, speeches that decided the fate of the world and the fate of both Europe’s Jews and Zionism.” Such level of detail assures that while the general reader may not persevere, every future biographer of Ben-Gurion will keep those four volumes on his or her desk. Perhaps that was Teveth’s aim all along.

I’ve missed Sabi very much these last twelve years, and suspect I’ll miss him still more with the passage of time. This is not only because he was my friend, but because I see no one who combines his mix of passion, energy, and encyclopedic knowledge in the pursuit of every recoverable fragment of evidence needed to establish the truth. My condolences to Ora, his wife, who sustained him through all the years of his disability and saw the last volume of the Ben-Gurion biography through to publication, and to their children and grandchildren, in whom Sabi took so much pride.

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Shabtai Teveth