

Golda Meir's Nightmare

By Amnon Barzilai

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Did the prime minister make a fatal mistake when she decided not to order a preemptive strike on October 6, 1973? Opinions about this decision, as well as an array of other issues pertaining to the catastrophic Yom Kippur War, still divide commentators

Before daybreak on Yom Kippur, October 6, 1973, Golda Meir had a bad night's sleep. She had a premonition that something dreadful was about to happen.

On Yom Kippur eve, she joined her son Menachem Meir, a cellist, and his wife Aya, for a pre-fast meal. The couple and their children lived in an apartment on Baron Maurice Hirsch street in Ramat Aviv, not far from Meir's own apartment. The prime minister was acquainted with most of the guests; however, her son says, she was not in a friendly mood that evening. She seemed troubled, and left earlier than expected.

"We sat down to eat, but I was very restless and had no appetite at all ... I excused myself and went to bed. But I couldn't sleep ... I lay awake for hours, unable to sleep. Eventually, I must have dozed off," Meir wrote in her autobiography, "My Life."

Golda Meir, it turns out, suffered from recurring nightmares. Obliquely, she revealed a glimpse of them during a discussion held on the third anniversary of the 1967 Six-Day War, during the War of Attrition. Posing his question in a challenging, defiant tone, the writer Amos Oz asked: "What do you dream about?" Meir replied tersely: "I don't have time to dream. I don't really sleep because the telephone rings at night to inform me about Israelis who have been hurt."

After Meir's death, Yaakov Hazan, a leader of the left-wing Mapam party, wrote in the kibbutz movement journal *Shdemot* that Meir told him about her recurring bad dream. "'Do you remember, Hazan,' Golda told me, 'the question that Amos Oz posed to me? I was surprised. I knew which dreams he was referring to. Because what sort of person worthy of being called a human being doesn't dream? His question struck me as being offensive. I mumbled my answer because I didn't want to, and I couldn't, tell him what I dream about.

"Yes, I dream, intensely. But it's all one nightmare. Suddenly all the telephones in my home start to ring; there are a lot of phones, located in every corner of the house, and they don't stop ringing. I know what the ringing means, and I'm afraid to pick up all the receivers. I wake up covered in a cold sweat. It's quiet in the house. I breath a sigh of relief, but can't get back to sleep. I know that if I fall back to sleep, the dream will return. I sometimes wonder when that

dream will go away - when it does, I'll once again dream about our happy lives.'"

At 4 A.M. on that 1973 Yom Kippur, the phone rang in the prime minister's home. Golda Meir's nightmare became a reality.

Her military secretary, Brigadier General Yisrael Lior, was on the line. He told her, concisely: "Information has come saying that the Egyptians and Syrians will launch a combined attack on Israel in the afternoon."

Before she left her house that Saturday morning, Meir asked her military secretary to convene a meeting with Israel Defense Forces Chief of Staff David ("Dado") Elazar, and ministers Moshe Dayan, Yigal Allon, and Yisrael Galili. Participants were to gather in her office before 7 A.M., but the meeting was delayed. At about 8 A.M., two matters were brought to Meir's attention by Elazar and Dayan, the defense minister.

The men disagreed about the two subjects - the scope of the reservist call-up, and whether or not a preemptive strike should be ordered.

The chief of staff asked to call up 200,000 reservists. Dayan, who had trouble grasping that war was at hand, agreed to enlist some 20,000-30,000 reservists. "That's my proposal," Dayan told Meir, "but I won't resign if you decide against me."

"My God," Meir moaned to herself (as recorded in her memoir). "I have to decide which of them is right?" Meir then backed Elazar's proposal. "What I said was that I had only one criterion: If there really was a war, then we had to be in the very best position possible. The call-up should be as Dado suggested."

The issue of whether or not to deliver a preemptive blow was more complicated. Elazar claimed that launching such a strike would save many lives. Dayan counseled that the chance of such a blow succeeding, at a time when the army had yet to be called up for deployment, was slight. The prime minister refused to go ahead with the preemptive strike. As Meir recalled: "'Dado,' I said, 'I know all the arguments in favor of a preemptive strike, but I am against it. We don't know, any of us, what the future will hold, but there is always the possibility that we will need help, and if we strike first, we will get nothing from anyone.'"

Three years later, two young Jewish researchers, Steven Rosen and Martin Indyk (the future U.S. ambassador to Israel), wrote a study entitled "The Temptation of Preemption in the Fifth Arab-Israel War." Their research probed the price paid by Israel as a result of the decision not to go ahead with the preemptive strike. Had Meir authorized

such a strike against Syria's missiles and air force, the pair wrote, it could have destroyed 90 percent of Syria's missile bases within three to six hours, at a price of less than 10 lost Israeli planes.

"Clearly, this result would have had a decisive impact on air force losses later on, and also (and this is still more significant) on the efficiency of tens of thousands of air force sorties conducted during the war. Israeli fatalities on the ground would have been reduced, the wearing down of Arab artillery, and of tanks and fortified vehicles from Arab armies, would have accelerated, and strikes against Egyptian bridges on the [Suez] canal would have been more efficient," the study argued.

At peace with decision

Kenneth Keating, the U.S. ambassador to Israel, arrived at the prime minister's office while the meeting was still in session. Meir adjourned it, and briefed Keating about the joint Egyptian-Syrian attack. Later, the ambassador delivered a message from Henry Kissinger, warning Israel's government against taking the first steps to start a war.

In her autobiography, Meir wrote that she was at peace with her decision, which, she claimed, clinched America's airlift to Israel. Indyk and Rosen, however, disputed this interpretation. In their view, had Israel launched a preemptive strike, its action would not have influenced the White House's policy.

Avner Shalev, then bureau chief in Elazar's office and later the IDF's chief education officer, justified Meir's decision. "I believe a preemptive strike, along the lines of what Elazar wanted, would have changed the picture. Elazar wanted to deploy the air force, particularly against the Syrians. But when he lobbied for a preventive attack, the head of Military Intelligence [Aman], Major General Eli Zeira, predicted that a war would not then erupt, and Dayan was influenced by him. At that stage, when it still wasn't known for sure whether war would start, giving support to the chief of staff, against the opinion of Dayan and Zeira, would have been no small matter. It came down to the decision of one person. And you have to keep in mind, the public didn't have an inkling as to what was going on. It wasn't prepared psychologically for war."

Military historian Meir Pail was appointed after the Yom Kippur War to serve on a research team formed by the IDF's history department (the team was commissioned to investigate the strategic handling of the war). As Pail sees it, Meir was right not to launch a preemptive strike. In an interview with *Haaretz*, he said:

“Could the air force have acted against Egypt, as it had during the War of Attrition? At a time when there was a cease-fire? When we had no pretext to act? And against Syria? That morning, we didn’t know for certain that a war would erupt. Nor did the world know about Syria and Egypt’s mobilization for war. In order to engage a preventive strike, you need a pretext, a cause, that the outside world can understand. That especially holds true with respect to the U.S. The world would have accused us of being paranoid. What reason would we have given to explain why we were attacking Syria?”

In retrospect, it appears the IDF would have been unable to launch a preemptive strike. The government met in the early afternoon, and participants assumed the attack would come a few hours later, at 6 P.M. The cabinet, in other words, believed there was still time to undertake the preparations needed by the air force for a preventive strike. However, at 1:55 P.M., while government members were in their meeting, military secretary Yisrael Lior entered the conference room and announced that the war had started. Discussion about the option of a preemptive war became moot.

Immediately, sirens blasted around the country. Egyptian and Syrian planes attacked IDF bases and tanks; large numbers of Egyptian and Syrian infantrymen began to move on the ground.

Had Meir briefed all government ministers about information in her possession that Thursday, it is possible that Israel’s leadership might have reexamined the prevailing strategic “conception” (according to which Israeli officials believed the probability of a surprise attack was very low). In any case, the government might have made diplomatic efforts; it might have delivered messages to Israel’s public and the world about threatening deployments of the Egyptian and Syrian armies.

King Hussein’s warning

On September 25, 1973, just 12 days before the start of the Yom Kippur War, Golda Meir met with Jordan’s King Hussein. The Hashemite ruler initiated the urgent meeting. Risking his own life and the future of his monarchy, King warned Meir that diplomatic impasse would lead to war. He said Egypt and Syria were intent on going to war.

Today, 30 years after the encounter, opinions differ as to the nature of King Hussein’s warning. If it is true that Meir had a reliable source that furnished her with first-hand information about an impending Egyptian-Syrian attack, and that the prime minister shared this information with her defense minister, then Israel’s political leadership is responsible for a major intelligence failure, a lethal gaffe no less serious than mistakes attributed by the state commission of inquiry, headed by Supreme Court president Shimon Agranat, to Military Intelligence’s Zeira. This is precisely the claim Zeira made after the initial

disclosure some 15 years ago of the secret Hussein-Meir meeting.

Other participants in the meeting, which was held in the guest room of the Mossad’s Pi Giliot facility, included Mordechai Gazit, who was then director-general of the Prime Minister’s Office, and Lou Keidar, Meir’s assistant and confidante. The discussion was filmed on closed circuit television, and broadcast on a screen in the next room, which housed military secretary Lior, IDF intelligence officers, and other security officials.

Meir asked Dayan whether she should cancel the trip. Dayan replied that the Jordanian king’s comments conveyed nothing new. In his opinion, there was no reason for her to change her plans.

Lou Keidar’s heart sank after the meeting at the Mossad facility. “After hearing what Hussein said, I had the impression that we should prepare for war. That’s what I thought. My feeling ... was that, though King Hussein didn’t know all the details, he knew enough to understand that war would break out ... I learned from the meeting that Syria and Egypt were cooperating, and that they would attack together ... But that didn’t sway Golda. Golda didn’t believe Hussein. Later, when we returned to Jerusalem and were alone together in a car, I said to her: ‘I understand that the trip to Strasbourg won’t happen,’ and she replied, ‘Why not?’ Then I said to myself that either she didn’t understand a single thing, or I didn’t understand anything.”

Keidar’s recollection was documented by Guy Gavra, in a master’s essay submitted three years ago about the meeting between Hussein and Meir. Gavra, an IDF intelligence officer, is aware of discrepancies between Keidar’s account and the one provided by Eitan Haber in his Hebrew volume “A War Will Break Out Today,” which is based on the recollections of military secretary Lior.

Gavra: “It appears that precisely Keidar’s lack of familiarity regarding the [strategic] conceptions of the time led her to take the king’s statements at face value - that is, as a direct warning about a combined, Egyptian-Syrian, attack.”

Keidar was not alone in her feelings. Sitting alongside Lior was Lieutenant Colonel Zusia Kniazar, head of the Jordan Desk at Military Intelligence’s research department. “At the end of the meeting,” Kniazar told Gavra, “I phoned the head of the research department, Brigadier General Aryeh Shalev, and I told him: ‘Look, Aryeh, the bottom line of the meeting is this: War! Syria and Egypt are poised to attack Israel; I’ll give you the details tomorrow morning.’”

Gavra concluded in his study that Hussein did, indeed, warn of a Syrian attack on the Golan Heights. And the logical inference to be drawn from this warning, Kniazar concluded, was that there would be a joint, Syrian-Egyptian, attack.

Yet the information relayed to Meir does not absolve Zeira of responsibility for the intelligence

failure. Zeira received all details about the meeting, and decided nonetheless to downplay the significance of Hussein’s warning.

A decade ago, *Haaretz*’s Ze’ev Schiff quoted a senior Jordanian source, a former prime minister, as saying: “Had King Hussein been invited to testify to your Agranat Commission, his statements would have reversed its conclusions. You would have perceived a few matters completely differently.”

Hussein made a similar statement to Yitzhak Rabin in August 1974, less than a year after the war, according to journalist Danny Bloch. At the meeting, which was also attended by Yigal Allon and Shimon Peres, Hussein reportedly expressed regret about Meir’s and Dayan’s withdrawal from the political scene, and added that he couldn’t understand why they had ignored his warning. “They were fortunate,” he said, “that I wasn’t called to testify to the Agranat Commission.”

There are other interpretations of the contents of the September 25 meeting. Prof. Avi Shlaim of Oxford University met with King Hussein about two years before his death, as part of a research study about peacemaking efforts in the Middle East. Hussein denied that he knew a war was about to erupt.

Meir contemplated suicide

“On the second day of the war, I decided to commit suicide,” Golda Meir confessed, three years after the Yom Kippur War, during a conversation with Brigadier General Avner Shalev, who served as Elazar’s bureau chief. Shalev, along with Rehavam Ze’evi, tried to persuade the former prime minister to attend the memorial ceremony for Elazar, who had died a month earlier. These were the circumstances that led Meir to think about suicide:

On Sunday, October 7, at 3 P.M., the defense minister briefed her about the situation on the various fronts. Dayan confessed he had erred about everything, and that a holocaust was about to engulf the country. The balance of forces was tipped strongly in favor of Syria and Egypt. The IDF was unable to respond. Dayan proposed that Meir order a deep withdrawal in the Golan Heights, and concede the Suez Canal. In her autobiography, Meir omitted these telling remarks by Dayan. Her version reads: “On Sunday, Dayan came in to my office. He closed the door and stood in front of me. ‘Do you want me to resign?’ he asked. ‘I am prepared to do so if you think I should.’ ... I told him - and I have never regretted this - that he had to stay on as minister of defense.”

In his Hebrew memoir, “Milestones,” Dayan wrote: “The prime minister and the ministers were shocked by my remarks. From their questions and comments and facial expressions I could tell that I hadn’t persuaded them ...”

Golda maintained her composure. That evening, she asked the chief of staff to come to her office.

She told him about Dayan's report, and asked for Elazar's opinion. The chief of staff confirmed that the situation was bad and the danger great; but, before reaching a decision about a retreat, he asked to clarify circumstances in the field. Elazar then recommended that Chaim Bar Lev be sent to the northern front.

Meir told Shalev and Ze'evi: "So, I told myself that if Dayan is correct in his estimate of the situation, and not Elazar, then I'll know exactly what to do. I'll commit suicide. But, as you know, Elazar was right." Meir heaped praise on Elazar for his handling of the war, concluding: "You must know: Elazar saved the people of Israel."

Shalev then asked Meir: "Why didn't you say all this to the Agranat Commission, which decided to oust Elazar from his post?"

Meir: "What would you have wanted - a new affair?"

Meir and the bomb

"Moshe Dayan's fears and Israel's gloom turned around during a dramatic meeting on Monday, October 8, at Golda Meir's office in Tel Aviv," wrote Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Seymour Hersch in his book, "The Samson Option: Israel's Nuclear Arsenal and American Foreign Policy."

"Over the next three hours, the Israeli leadership - faced with its greatest crisis - resolved to implement three critical decisions: it would rally its collapsing forces for a major counterattack; it would arm and target its nuclear arsenal in the event of total collapse ... and, finally, it would inform Washington of its unprecedented nuclear action, and unprecedented peril, and demand that the United States begin an emergency airlift."

According to Hersch's account, Israel had an arsenal of 25 nuclear bombs when war erupted. He quoted a senior Israeli official, who was present at the prime minister's office. "The senior official described the fear that swept through the prime minister's staff when the arming of nuclear weapons became known," Hersch wrote. The official, Hersch said, recalled: "There were a few days there when it seemed that the end of the world was near. For those of us who lived through the Holocaust, we knew one thing - it will never happen again."

Prof. Avner Cohen, a senior lecturer at the University of Maryland and the author of the study "Israel and the Bomb," argued that Golda Meir left behind a critical, fateful legacy.

This week, Cohen said: "One can say that Golda Meir is one of a small group of world leaders - perhaps we are only talking about two individuals,

Meir during the Yom Kippur War and President Kennedy during the Cuban Missile Crisis - whose behavior showed an understanding of, and which strengthened, the taboo against the use of nuclear arms.

"Golda grasped that nuclear arms cannot be used as though they are just another weapons system. She understood that they must be regarded as weapons that can never be utilized, except under the most extreme circumstances, as weapons of last resort. She understood that the decisions regarding the use of judgment day weapons of mass destruction belong exclusively to a nation's civilian leadership, and not to its top military echelon."

As the war ended, and as public pressure mounted for the dispersal of the government and the establishment of a commission of inquiry, Meir conferred with Dayan. The meeting was held in Meir's office, in the presence of Shulamit Yaffe, personal shorthand note-taker for Israeli prime ministers from David Ben-Gurion through Benjamin Netanyahu. Meir said: "There's no getting around the establishment of a commission of inquiry." Dayan reflected for a moment, and said: "I agree, but on one condition. I want Chaim Laskov to be on it."

Yaffe (who passed away last year) kept this secret for decades, disclosing it just two years ago to Elazar's widow.

Meir the military leader

"She was a political-diplomatic disaster, but I couldn't believe what I read in the documents: Golda behaved during the war as a wise, successful military leader. She handled the war prudently and quietly, while Dayan was peeing in his pants," said IDF Colonel (res.) Dr. Meir Pail.

When the war started, Golda Meir appointed a war cabinet, which functioned until the fighting ended, and included civilian figures (Meir, Dayan, Allon, Galili). Military delegates on the special cabinet included Elazar and his deputy Yisrael Tal, Israel Air Force Commander-in-Chief Benny Peld, Military Intelligence chief Zeira and Mossad director Zvi Zamir. "These figures met almost every day," Pail said. "I read minutes from all discussions they staged. And I learned to respect Golda."

Meir was responsible for a series of fateful decisions. In a number of instances, she had to choose between positions taken by Elazar and Dayan, or even between Elazar and his deputy Tal. Meir noted in her autobiography that, "fortunately," she always sided with Elazar in his clashes with Dayan.

The war cabinet's first decision regarded halting the Syrian advance on the Golan Heights, before the enemy reached the Sea of Galilee. Meir authorized dispatching to the Golan Heights a division that had defended Jerusalem and the center of the country. The division, commanded by Moshe ("Musa") Peled, turned the tide, and the Syrians were repulsed back to the purple line (the border between Israel and Syria since 1967).

Meir then faced the question of whether troops should be moved from the Golan Heights to the Sinai Peninsula. The prime minister endorsed Elazar's proposal to defer the attack in Sinai, and to capitalize on the success in the Golan Heights by moving tank troops eastward, so as to put Damascus within range of Israeli artillery. The IDF wanted to move within 20 kilometers of the Syrian capital, but its troops were held up by the Syrians, who enjoyed back-up support from troops from Iraq and Jordan. The IDF was stopped some 40 to 50 kilometers from Damascus.

Describing the decision to appoint Bar Lev commander in the south (reached after it became clear that IDF Southern Commander, Major General Shmuel Gonen, nicknamed "Gorodish," was unable to control the three division commanders in the region), Pail wrote: "This appointment, as ratified by Golda, was an excellent decision." Bar Lev, Golda wrote in her book, "has a slow, very deliberate way of speaking and when I heard him say 'G-o-l-d-a, it will be all right. We are back to being ourselves and they are back to being themselves,' I knew that the tide had turned ..." Overriding Dayan's objections, Meir decided to approve the crossing of the Suez Canal. The decision that led to the end of the war was to surround Egypt's Third Army; here again, Meir had to fend off a number of proposals, before backing a plan that was subsequently vindicated.

Peace activist and former MK Uri Avnery supports Pail's contention that Meir displayed military leadership during the war: "Dayan collapsed. The generals started to treat him with contempt," Avnery says. "It was easy for Golda because the IDF chief of staff stood alongside her; and his absolute confidence, and his declaration that we will win, gave her strength. And there was also Bar Lev, whom she trusted. So she stood strong during the war.

But she was a genuine disaster. I hold her responsible for the deaths of 2,600 soldiers. This was an unnecessary war. It was a war that didn't bring any good to the State of Israel." ▲

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