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WHY HAMMARSKJOLD CAME TO BEN-GURION

WHO WAS JACOB —
AND WHO THE ANGEL?

From Jon Kimche

It was one of the strangest diplomatic visits that even the old hands could recall. Nothing about it followed protocol. It was more like a favourite uncle dropping in for tea than "the Secretary for the World," as the Israel children describe Hammarskjold, arriving with dramatic unexpectedness on what was clearly a most important mission.

Shortly before his arrival senior U.N. officials in Jerusalem and New York knew nothing of the intended visit and were still inclined to be sceptical about it. The only two people who seemed to know what was going on were Ben-Gurion and Hammarskjold. It was clearly essentially a personal matter between these two. This assumption proved in the event to be the right one.

Seven hours talk: Hammarskjold, accompanied by no advisers, no assistants and no secretaries (when did this last happen in international negotiations?) stepped out from his white U.N. plane looking almost a little lost amidst the large, though informal, official coterie that had come to greet him. With him was General Burns and one "security official" of the U.N. That was all. He was greeted by Walter Eytan, an old acquaintance, introduced to Golda Myerson ("it was very nice of you to come to meet me," said Hammarskjold to Israel's new Foreign Minister) and five minutes after they had landed the Foreign Minister and U.N. Secretary-General were on their way to Jerusalem. By nine in the morning they had arrived.

Two hours later began the series of conversations which became not so much a seven hours diplomatic encounter between Ben-Gurion and Hammarskjold as a wrestling contest in which Jacob and the Angel fought for each other's soul. Without this personal (and political) background to this extraordinary meeting it is impossible either to understand, or correctly appreciate, the purpose of the Jerusalem encounter.

Dispute over Report: Following Hammarskjold's last visit to Jerusalem in



Dispelling a "psychosis"—Burns, Ben-Gurion, Myerson, Hammarskjold.

April, the two men had parted on terms of mutual appreciation. They both believed at the time that as a result of their discussions they now understood each other. This understanding had not been easily come by; it had taken some hard exchanges. Because of that it seemed all the more real.

But then in May came Hammarskjold's report to the Security Council, and after that the discussion in the Council which resulted in the deletion of the reference in the resolution to "a mutually acceptable agreement." The report made a number of statements which some of the Israeli leaders claimed were at variance with the agreement reached during the Jerusalem discussions. Later, when it became generally known that Hammarskjold had himself taken the initiative in deleting the reference to a mutually acceptable agreement in the Security Council, the tide really turned against him.

A "Hammarskjold psychosis" developed which reached into the upper strata of the administration, and which was given full play in the press of virtually every Party. This changed mood about the U.N. Secretary-General, which was so apparent, was generally thought to reflect the changed outlook of Premier Ben-Gurion himself.

Assumption unwarranted: The revised opinion, as popularly canvassed, was based on the view that Hammarskjold had come to Israel to prepare the

ground for an imposed settlement dictated by the Great Powers—West and East—by the Vatican and by the majority of Asian nations. Hammarskjold almost overnight had become the spokesman for the entire world planning to force little Israel to her knees.

Closer investigation, however, has shown that the assumption that Ben-Gurion shared and had inspired this new approach to the U.N. was not warranted—at least as far as the crude and oversimplified definition of Hammarskjold's role was concerned. But Ben-Gurion, it is now clear, had become seriously perturbed by the course steered by the Secretary-General; he had become distrustful.

Hammarskjold's approach: The Secretary-General seemed to become aware of this chilliness emanating from Jerusalem and apparently decided that this was a development which might have unfortunate consequences if allowed to continue unchecked. Apparently, without directly referring to this estrangement, he wrote a personal letter to Ben-Gurion which included the suggestion that the two might meet soon for an informal survey of the situation.

Ben-Gurion replied, making some of his familiar points and adding that he would be happy to meet again with Hammarskjold. He added, however, that to be effective the Secretary-General ought to include Cairo in his itinerary, and since Nasser was away, the visit would best be

postponed until after his Conference at Brione with Tito and Nehru. Probably there was the further pertinent consideration in Ben-Gurion's mind that it would be more to the point to meet with Hammarskjold after he had been to Moscow and talked to Shepilov and the top leaders there.

In the event it turned out to be a most relevant consideration.

A "Dulles thesis": Since Israelis—and so many others—never trust the obvious, a new version of the reasons for Hammarskjold's journey began to gain ground over the weekend. It was difficult to say where it had originated, but it soon became the popularly accepted explanation for the Hammarskjold detour on his journey to Geneva.

Dulles, it was explained, was really worried by the departure of Sharett and by subsequent developments on the Jordan border. When he saw Hammarskjold before the Secretary-General left for Moscow, he pleaded with him, so the story runs, to stop the rot on the Israel border and discourage Ben-Gurion from any hasty action. But both the time-table and the tenor of the Hammarskjold letters to Ben-Gurion do not bear out the thesis that Hammarskjold came as a kind of emergency messenger from Dulles "to stay Ben-Gurion's hand before it struck."

The conversations: Now what did happen when Hammarskjold arrived in Jerusalem on Thursday of last week? In the morning he met alone with Ben-Gurion for 2½ hours, and in the afternoon again for 2½ hours. In the evening Hammarskjold had a twosome dinner party with Walter Eytan, and they talked afterwards for over two hours in Eytan's study.

On Friday morning Golda Myerson and Josef Tekoah, who deals with Armistice Affairs in the Israel Foreign Ministry, and General Burns and his political adviser, Henri Vigier, were also present when the Prime Minister and the U.N. Secretary-General met. On Friday afternoon, Ben-Gurion and Hammarskjold met for another two hours by themselves.

The outcome of these meetings—especially, of the three personal encounters—was by its very nature somewhat imprecise. No one takes notes, no one draws conclusions. It would have ruined the character of these discussions had any third party intervened with pen and paper. But some highlights of the discussion have emerged.

Discussion on retaliation: There was a major discussion on the rights and wrongs of retaliation as a policy. The Secretary-General argues, it seems, that

retaliation is both unethical and ineffective as a policy. However strong the Israel case was, retaliation would turn world opinion against Israel. Ben-Gurion and Mrs. Myerson did not share this view. They argued that they owed a responsibility to their citizens to protect them. They could not simply do nothing.

But it appears that Ben-Gurion was not implying that Israel was about to launch a retaliatory reaction as a counter to recent attacks. It would also be a mistake to assume that Ben-Gurion will do nothing. Israel, it seems, has greatly improved its machinery for pin-pointing actual raiders and organisers of marauders into Israel. In future, therefore, retaliatory action may be organised against the actual attackers rather than at whole villages.

A second discussion, linked with the problem of retaliation, apparently dealt with the importance of establishing the absolute character of the cease-fire. Hammarskjold wanted to establish its absolute character, no matter how great the provocation. The Israelis argued strongly that it takes two to make such a guarantee practical.

Two views of Nasser: Important also seems to be Hammarskjold's assessment of Nasser. He does not go as far as either the British or the Americans have gone in writing off Nasser as a political force in the Middle East. He believes that, given all the prevailing circumstances, Nasser has probably strengthened his position by the 98 per cent who voted for him as Egypt's President. The firmer Nasser sits in the domestic saddle, the more likely is he to be a moderating element in the Arab world.

The Israeli position on this point is, to say the least, reserved. Hammarskjold's appreciation of Nasser is not generally shared; the Israelis say they are more conscious of Nasser's bellicosity, but they are not unwilling to be convinced. If Hammarskjold is right Nasser will have to convince the Israelis by his deeds. There was not a great deal of progress to report on this count, but on the whole the respective attitudes to Nasser by Hammarskjold and Israel were more clearly understood by each other. The margin for misunderstanding on that point had been narrowed.

Soviet policy: The fourth—and perhaps the most important—issue which emerged from the discussion is that the Israelis were considerably reassured about Soviet policy towards Israel. It was not so much that Hammarskjold could say that the Russians had clarified

their position towards Israel, but they had made clear their commitment to Egypt and the other Arab states. This was limited by the policy statement Shepilov made to Nasser and the other Arab leaders: i.e. that they would continue to enjoy Soviet support "against the imperialists", especially the Baghdad Pact, and that the Soviet Union wanted an Israel-Arab settlement reached by direct negotiations.

The Israelis were greatly encouraged by this clarification of the Soviet position, yet here too they are inclined to restrain their cheers until they see how this Soviet policy works out in relation to the arming of Egypt and Syria, and also how the Soviet Union now stands on the Jordan water project.

An "honest broker": These were some, though by no means all, of the principal issues that seem to have cropped up in the Jerusalem conversations. But more important than the detail appears to be the overall effect created by the unorthodox visit by the Secretary-General. It would seem that Hammarskjold has succeeded in convincing the doubting Israelis that he was playing the role of a sincere and honest broker—and not that of a loaded-dice dealer as some had feared before he came.

He has again shown his stature as one of the world's great statesmen by his understanding and approach. He has also, it seems, come close to really appreciating the springs of action in Ben-Gurion and the people of Israel. That he has been able to achieve this is largely due to his opposite number in these talks. In one sense it is a great pity that no text of the talks exists, for the meeting of these two great statesmen and great talkers (in the best sense of the word) would have provided an almost unique commentary on the present situation.

Press comment: Against the background of this important meeting one must regard with regret the treatment some of the more serious sections of the Israeli press have accorded this visit.

Thus on the day of the Secretary-General's arrival, an important Israeli daily carried an editorial which explained that Israelis were an unpolitical people and bad diplomats because they believe only in straight-forward dealing and positive policies, while in the outside world political lies are the essence of life, and more in this coin. In fairness to the Israelis I must add that I did not meet any one who was not embarrassed by this particular thesis. Who, one wonders, "inspires" such nonsense?