



Brothers in Arms: Golda Meir Speaks to American Jews

Sarah Wapner

Monday, Aug. 9 at 7:00 PM EDT

Course Description:

On January 22, 1948, Golda Meir flew to the United States to address the General Assembly of the Council of Jewish Federations in Chicago. In her characteristically independent fashion, she made an emotional appeal to American Jewry for their support of the Yishuv. This speech had an enormous impact on its listeners, and the funds yielded were crucial to the Jewish war effort. In this seminar, students will do a close reading of Meir's speech, considering the success of her arguments while exploring the powerful role of the diaspora in the establishment of the Jewish State. This seminar will also consider the evolving relationship between American and Israeli Jews today, and the enduring importance of Israel in American-Jewish hearts and minds.

Guiding Questions:

1. Golda Meir lays out the case for Diaspora Jewry's main role with respect to Israel being to provide money. Do you agree or disagree, and why?
2. Which of Golda Meir's arguments did you find most and least persuasive?
3. What are (if any) the obligations of the Jewish diaspora towards Israel today?
4. What made Meir's speech a great one in its content and its style? Is this a great speech?

“To the Council of Jewish Federations”

Golda Meir

2 January 1948

I have had the privilege of representing Palestine Jewry in this country and in other countries when the problems that we faced were those of building more kibbutzim, of bringing in more Jews in spite of political obstacles and Arab riots.

We always had faith that in the end we would win, that everything we were doing in the country led to the independence of the Jewish people and to **a Jewish state**.

Long before we had dared pronounce that word, we knew what was in store for us.

Today we have reached a point when the nations of the world have given us their decision - the establishment of a Jewish state in a part of Palestine. Now in Palestine we are fighting to make this resolution of the United Nations a reality, not because we wanted to fight. If we had the choice, we would have chosen peace to build in peace.

Friends, we have no alternative in Palestine. The Mufti and his men have declared war upon us. We have to fight for our lives, for our safety, and for what we have accomplished in Palestine, and perhaps above all, we must fight for Jewish honour and Jewish independence. Without exaggeration, I can tell you that the Jewish community in Palestine is doing this well. Many of you have visited Palestine; all of you have read about our young people and have a notion as to what our youth is like. I have known this generation for the last twenty-seven years. I thought I knew them. I realize now that even I did not.

These young boys and girls, many in their teens, are bearing the burden of what is happening in the country with a spirit that no words can describe. You see these youngsters in open cars—not armoured cars—in convoys going from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, knowing that every time they start out from Tel Aviv or from Jerusalem there are probably Arabs behind the orange groves or the hills, waiting to ambush the convoy.

These boys and girls have accepted the task of bringing Jews over these roads in safety as naturally as though they were going out to their daily work or to their classes in the university.

We must ask the Jews the world over to see us as the front line .

All we ask of Jews the world over, and mainly of the Jews in the United States, is to give us the possibility of going on with the struggle.

When trouble started, we asked young people from the age of seventeen to twenty-five who were not members of Haganah, to volunteer. Up to the day that I left home on Thursday morning, when the registration of this age group was still going on, over 20,000 young men and women had signed up. As of now we have about 9,000 people mobilized in the various parts of the country. We must triple this number within the next few days.

We have to maintain these men. No government sends its soldiers to the front and expects them to take along from their homes the most elementary requirements—blankets, bedding, clothing.

A people that is fighting for its very life knows how to supply the men they send to the front lines. We too must do the same.

Thirty-five of our boys, unable to go by car on the road to besieged Kfar Etzion to bring help, set out by foot through the hills; they knew the road, the Arab villages on that road, and the danger they would have to face. Some of the finest youngsters we have in the country were in that group, and they were all killed, every one of them. We have a description from an Arab of how they fought to the end for over seven hours against hundreds of Arabs. According to this Arab, the last boy killed, with no more ammunition left, died with a stone in his hand.

I want to say to you, friends, that the Jewish community in Palestine is going to fight to the very end. If we have arms to fight with, we will fight with those, and if not, we will fight with stones in our hands.

I want you to believe me when I say that I came on this special mission to the United States today not to save 700,000 Jews. During the last few years the Jewish people lost 6,000,000 Jews, and it would be audacity on our part to worry the Jewish people throughout the world because a few hundred thousand more Jews were in danger. That is not the issue.

The issue is that if these 700,000 Jews in Palestine can remain alive, then the Jewish people as such is alive and Jewish independence is assured. If these 700,000 people are killed off, then for many centuries, we are through with this dream of a Jewish people and a Jewish homeland.

My friends, we are at war. There is no Jew in Palestine who does not believe that finally we will be victorious. That is the spirit of the country. We have known Arab riots since 1921 and '29 and '36. We know what happened to the Jews of Europe during this last war. And every Jew in the country also knows that within a few months a Jewish state in Palestine will be established.

We knew that the price we would have to pay would be the best of our people. There are over 300 killed by now. There will be more. There is no doubt that there will be more. But there is also no doubt that the spirit of our young people is such that no matter how many Arabs invade the country, their spirit will not falter. However, this valiant spirit alone cannot face rifles and machine guns. Rifles and machine guns without spirit are not worth very much, but spirit without arms can in time be broken with the body.

Much must be prepared now so that we can hold out. There are unlimited opportunities, but are we going to get the necessary means? Considering myself not as a guest, but as one of you, I say that the question before each one is simply whether the Yishuv, and the youngsters that are in the front line, will have to fail because money that should have reached Palestine today will reach it in a month or two months from now?

Is it possible that time should decide the issue not because Palestinian Jews are cowards, not because they are incapable, but merely because they lack the material means to carry on?

I have come to the United States, and I hope you will understand me if I say that it is not an easy matter for any of us to leave home at present—to my sorrow I am not in the front line. I am not with my daughter in the Negev or with other sons and daughters in the trenches. But I have a job to do.

I have come here to try to impress Jews in the United States with the fact that within a very short period, a couple of weeks, we must have in cash between twenty-five and thirty million dollars. In the next two or three weeks we can establish ourselves. Of that we are convinced, and you must have faith; we are sure that we can carry on.

I said before that the Yishuv will give, is giving of its means. But please remember that even while shooting is going on, we must carry on so that our economy remains intact. Our factories must go on. Our settlements must not be broken up.

We know that this battle is being waged for those not yet in the country.

There are 30,000 Jews detained right next door to Palestine in Cyprus. I believe that within a very short period, within the next two or three months at most, these 30,000 will be with us, among them thousands of infants and young children. We must now think of preparing means of absorbing them. We know that within the very near future, hundreds of thousands more will be coming in. We must see that our economy is intact.

I want you to understand that there is no despair in the Yishuv. This is true not only of the young people. I have travelled the road from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem and other roads quite a bit. I have seen these dangerous buses filled not only with young Haganah men and girls, but with old people travelling the roads as a matter of course.

When you go to Tel Aviv now, you will find the city full of life; only the shooting that you hear on the outskirts of Tel Aviv and Jaffa reminds one that the situation in the country is not normal. But it would be a crime on my part not to describe the situation to you exactly as it is.

Merely with our ten fingers and merely with spirit and sacrifice, we cannot carry on this battle, and the only hinterland that we have is you. The Mufti has the Arab states—not all so enthusiastic about helping him but states with government budgets. The Egyptian government can vote a budget to aid our antagonists. The Syrian government can do the same

We have no government. But we have millions of Jews in the Diaspora, and exactly as we have faith in our youngsters in Palestine I have faith in Jews in the United States; I believe that they will realize the peril of our situation and will do what they have to do.

I know that we are not asking for something easy. I myself have sometimes been active in various campaigns and fund collections, and I know that collecting at once a sum such as I ask is not simple.

But I have seen our people at home. I have seen them come from the offices to the clinics when we called the community to give their blood for a blood bank to treat the wounded. I have seen them lined up for hours, waiting so that some of their blood can be added to this bank.

It is blood plus money that is being given in Palestine.

I know that many of you would be as anxious as our people to be on the very front line. I do not doubt that there are many young people among the Jewish community in the United States who would do exactly what our young people are doing in Palestine.

We are not a better breed; we are not the best Jews of the Jewish people. It so happened that we are there and you are here. I am certain that if you were in Palestine and we were in the United States, you would be doing what we are doing there, and you would ask us here to do what you will have to do.

I want to close with paraphrasing one of the greatest speeches that was made during the Second World War—the words of Churchill.

I am not exaggerating when I say that the Yishuv in Palestine will fight in the Negev and will fight in Galilee and will fight on the outskirts of Jerusalem until the very end. You cannot decide whether we should fight or not. We will. The Jewish community in Palestine will raise no white flag for the Mufti. That decision is taken. Nobody can change it. You can only decide one thing: whether we shall be victorious in this fight or whether the Mufti will be victorious. That decision American Jews can make. It has to be made quickly within hours, within days.

And I beg of you—don't be too late. Don't be bitterly sorry three months from now for what you failed to do today. The time is now.

I have spoken to you without a grain of exaggeration. I have not tried to paint the picture in false colours. It consists of spirit and certainty of our victory on the one hand, and dire necessity for carrying on the battle on the other.

I want to thank you again for having given me the opportunity at a conference that I am certain has a full agenda to say these few words to you. I leave the platform without any doubt in my mind or my heart that the decision that will be taken by American Jewry will be the same as that which was taken by the Jewish community in Palestine, so that within a few months from now we will all be able to participate not only in the joy of resolving to establish a Jewish state, but in the joy of laying the cornerstone of the Jewish state.