

Book Notes - Rabbi Steven Rubenstein

Ben Gurion: Father of Modern Israel by Anita Shapira

I just finished reading a brief biography of David Ben-Gurion called *Ben-Gurion: Father of Modern Israel*. It comes from the Yale University Press Jewish Lives series (<http://www.jewishlives.org/>.) Of course, you could find any number of books about David Ben-Gurion. Not only are there many straight biographies, but all sorts of books have been written about the various ways Ben-Gurion shaped aspects of the modern State of Israel—political, cultural, military, etc...

What I appreciated most in Shapira's telling of Ben-Gurion's life was that it is largely unsentimental. While Shapira quotes Berl Katznelson (Ben-Gurion's close friend and a leader himself) saying that Ben-Gurion was 'history's gift to the Jewish people,' she doesn't hide his blemishes and missteps. We learn of Ben-Gurion's lack of charisma, outbursts of anger, and political jealousies. Of course, if this was all to say about Ben-Gurion, he wouldn't have been the man who led the State of Israel as Prime Minister for so long.

Shapira traces Ben-Gurion's early years briefly, his early years in the Yishuv, and his political climb and conflicts along the way. She includes the famous picture of Ben-Gurion in Tel Aviv when he declares The State of Israel on May 14, 1948, but you come away with a sense of what brought Ben-Gurion to the moment and the sense of uncertainty that accompanied it.

If you are like me, an American Jew with a strong love of Israel, you may also feel (as I do), that we are always playing catch-up. Of course, we all know about Ben-Gurion and that he was a central figure in the work to create the modern State of Israel. Still, if you think about all of the stories that you know about the founding of the United States and the founders themselves, and compare that to what you know about the establishment of Israel, you may find that there is a large gap. Shapira's book won't bridge that gap fully, but it is part of my ongoing education about a critical figure in Jewish history.