David Ben-Gurion to FokusIsrael.ch: “We had one advantage: we were fighting for our existence!”

Summary:

- David Ben-Gurion may have been only 1.52 meters tall, but he is considered one of the greatest statesmen of the 20th century.
- On May 14, 1948, Ben-Gurion, born David Josef Grün in Poland in 1886, proclaimed the State of Israel and became its first Prime Minister.
- He did this despite warnings that he would also bring about the destruction of the Jewish state.
- Ben-Gurion himself was also plagued by doubts. In an AI interview with FokusIsrael.ch, he explains why he acted as he did.
- And he comments on two of his decisions that still weigh heavily on the state of Israel today: the lack of a constitution and the exemption of ultra-Orthodox Jews from compulsory service.
- David Ben-Gurion died in 1973 and is buried in the Sde Boker kibbutz in the south of Israel.

Mr. Ben-Gurion, why did you become a Zionist?

David Ben-Gurion: For me, Zionism was not a romantic idea, but a historical necessity. The Jewish people could not remain permanently dependent on the protection of others. A people must be the master of its own destiny. Zionism was the political form of this insight.

They represented a radical left-wing Zionism. Why?

Ben-Gurion: I was not an ideologue of socialism, but a practitioner of reconstruction. Without Jewish work, without an organized workforce, there would have been no Jewish state. For me, socialism was a means, not an end in itself – an instrument to create a nation.

After the Second World War, you visited camps for homeless Jews in Germany. In retrospect, certain historians criticized you for not showing any compassion.

Ben-Gurion: Compassion alone would not have changed anything. What I saw confirmed to me that the Jewish question could not be solved by charity. These people didn’t just need help, they needed a home and political self-determination. For me, the camps were proof that Zionism was not a theory, but a necessity.

What was your strategy with regard to the founding of the state?

Ben-Gurion: My strategy was not a single plan, but a sequence of necessities. First, the Jewish people had to be re-established in the country – through immigration and work. Without people, without agriculture, without cities, there is no state.

Then a force of its own had to emerge – economically, politically and finally also militarily. I have always said: without Jewish work there is no Jewish economy, and without defense there is no future.

We also had to gain international legitimacy. That is why the UN’s decision (the two-state solution, editor’s note) was important, even if it was not enough.

And then it was crucial that we acted when the opportunity presented itself. Because a state is not created by decisions alone, but by determination at the right moment. We had to be ready to proclaim the State of Israel, even if we didn’t know whether we would be able to defend it.

So you had doubts too?
Ben-Gurion: I doubted the circumstances, not the goal. I didn’t know whether we would win, but that the state had to come into being. I also knew that it would be threatened immediately and that the war would be long and difficult. But we had no alternative. The state of Israel was a necessity. It was always clear to me that not everything we wanted was achievable – but what was achievable had to be realized.

How important was the Holocaust as a justification for a Jewish state?

Ben-Gurion: Our right to a state is older than any catastrophe. But after the extermination, what we had long known became clear to everyone: without sovereignty, the Jewish people remain defenceless. The Holocaust was not the origin of our claim, but its most terrible proof.

Before the state was founded, you were involved in fierce conflicts with other Jewish groups such as the militant Irgun. What was it about?

Ben-Gurion: It was about the basis of statehood. A state cannot come into being if there are several armed authorities. There could not be two armies. If you don’t centralize power, you destroy the state before it exists.

Why did you have the ship “Altalena”, which was carrying weapons that were urgently needed, fired upon in June 1948? Even if they were partly destined for the Irgun.

Ben-Gurion: The weapons were important – but the state was more important. I was faced with the decision: Should there be one army or several? Should there be one authority or competing powers of command? The weapons on the “Altalena” were not only intended for the government army; some of them were to go to the Irgun fighters. If I had allowed that, we would have undermined the state at the moment of its birth. Perhaps there would have been more weapons – but no state to control them. There cannot be two armies in one state.

Couldn’t you have solved this problem differently?

Ben-Gurion: I tried to solve this differently. There were negotiations. But in the end it was no longer about weapons, but about authority. A state is also created through internal order. If different groups keep their own weapons, the result is not a state, but anarchy.

What was your attitude towards Menachem Begin?

Ben-Gurion: Politically, my relationship with Menachem Begin was characterized by a deep mistrust. I saw him as a rival who represented different principles. But I recognize that: At the decisive moment, he did not allow a civil war and thus saved Israel from an internal catastrophe.

What were these different principles?

Ben-Gurion: It was about the question of what constitutes a state. I was convinced that a state could only exist if there was an authority, a government and an army. The Irgun under Begin questioned this principle.

The Irgun became notorious for their 1946 attack on the British army headquarters

at the King David Hotel in Jerusalem. They are said to have been involved in the planning of the attack, but then rejected it.

Ben-Gurion: I was not involved in the planning of this attack. But I was responsible for the political line of the resistance against British rule at the time. After the attack, it was clear to me: we must not conduct our struggle in this way. Our fight against the British was necessary, but it must not destroy the moral and political foundation of the future state.

The Soviet Union supported Israel’s founding in the UN. Did that surprise you?
Ben-Gurion: It was surprising, but I had no illusions as to why. We could accept this support, but without making ourselves dependent. Israel had to go its own way – and not that of a foreign political bloc.

Why did you proclaim the state of Israel on May 14, 1948, even though the USA warned against it?
Ben-Gurion: Because there are moments that cannot be put off. The British Mandate for Palestine was ending and the opportunity was there. If we had hesitated, we might have lost everything. History does not wait.

I knew we were outnumbered and poorly equipped. But we had one advantage: we were fighting for our existence.

Contrary to your original assurances, you decided not to draw up a constitution after the proclamation of the State of Israel. Why did you do this?

Ben-Gurion: Because it could not be implemented at the time without dividing the young state. The conflict between religious and secular forces was too deep. In addition, I didn’t want a rigid order in a time that demanded flexibility. A functioning state was more important than a perfect constitution.

In retrospect, was that a mistake? With a constitution, Israel would have been spared many internal conflicts in recent decades.
Ben-Gurion: Perhaps we could have regulated some things more clearly at the beginning. But the alternative – drawing up a constitution – would have resulted in a conflict of principles that would have paralyzed the state from the outset. I opted for the ability to act rather than perfection.

At the time, you exempted around 400 ultra-Orthodox Jews from military service.

Was that a mistake?

Ben-Gurion: At the time, it was a limited, pragmatic decision. The world of the Torah had been destroyed and it had to be preserved. It was not foreseeable that this would become a much larger and permanent exemption from compulsory service.

What do you mean by “The world of the Torah was destroyed, it had to be preserved”?

Ben-Gurion: Before 1939, there was a dense Jewish culture, especially in Eastern Europe. This world was almost completely wiped out in the Holocaust. This tradition had to be rebuilt before it was completely lost. Otherwise, a central part of our Jewish identity would also have been lost.

Would you make the same decision today on the question of exempting the Haredim (ultra-Orthodox Jews) from compulsory service?
Ben-Gurion: No, not under today’s circumstances. When a small exception becomes a broad inequality, the question of justice arises anew. Decisions have to be adapted to reality.

What significance does the Jewish religion have for you personally?
Ben-Gurion: I am not a religious person in the traditional sense. But the Bible is central to me – not just as a religious document, but as a national document. My attachment to Judaism is cultural and historical, not orthodox.

Note: This interview is fictitious. It was created with the help of ChatGPT on the basis of David Ben-Gurion’s statements and writings at the time as well as historical reports about him*. In the coming weeks, we will be holding fictional conversations with other personalities from different areas of life – politics, religion, science, culture – who were important for Judaism and Israel, in order to bring their ideas closer to today’s audience. The The first interview was with Theodor Herzl the founder of modern Zionism, the second interview was with Chaim WeizmannIsrael’s first president.*