Summary

- On March 17, 1969, the Israeli parliament elected the then 71-year-old leader of the Labor Party, Golda Meir, as the country’s first female prime minister. She was only the third woman in the world to head a government.
- Born in Kiev, the charismatic “Iron Lady” was a convinced Zionist and became an icon of the Jewish people. She held the office of Prime Minister for five years. She had previously been Foreign Minister.
- The terrorist attack on Swissair flight SR 330 and the Munich Olympic bombing on September 5, 1972, in which Palestinian terrorists murdered 11 Israeli Olympic athletes, occurred during Meir’s term of office.
- Above all, however, Golda Meir’s time in office was marked by the 1973 Yom Kippur War, in which Israel was surprised by Egypt and came to the brink of defeat.
- After an independent investigation into the war, Golda Meir resigned in 1974 due to massive public pressure.
- On December 8, 1978, the chain smoker died in Jerusalem at the age of 80 as a result of lymph gland cancer.
- FokusIsrael.ch spoke to Golda Meir with the help of AI about her life, her time as head of government and her political convictions.

Golda Meir, how do you assess the current situation in the Middle East?

Golda Meir: The basic problems have not changed: Security, recognition and

mistrust. Peace does not come from wishful thinking, but from hard decisions and reliable partners. As long as Israel’s existence is called into question, security remains our first duty.

They argue that the conflict is not about borders, but about the existence of Israel.

Golda Meir: Of course. If the Arabs had accepted our existence here in Israel, the issue of the border would no longer be so important. The problem is that they don’t accept us. The Arabs want us dead. We want to live. There is no compromise.

They persist in talking about the Arabs and not the Palestinians.

Golda Meir: I question the term. Look: everyone who lived in Israel before 1948 was Palestinian. That is a fact. I myself still have a British-Palestinian passport. So I was a Palestinian from 1921 to 1948 (smiles). We were all Palestinians. We were not Jews or Arabs back then.

What do you mean by that?

Golda Meir: The term Palestinian was not an expression of an independent national identity as it is used today. It was a geographical designation under the British Mandate. Both Jews and Arabs were called that. When I speak of Arabs, I mean the Arab population of this region, which is culturally, linguistically and historically part of the larger Arab world. This is not a slight, but a description of reality.

And today?

Golda Meir: The problem arises when, in retrospect, terms are given a meaning that they did not have at the time. For us, it wasn’t about terminology, but about the practical question: how can two population groups live in the same country – and why was every attempt at partition or coexistence rejected by the Arabs?

When you immigrated to the then British Mandate of Palestine in 1921, did you expect that the realization of your Zionist dream would meet with so much resistance from the Arab side?

Golda Meir: No, to be honest, not at all. I knew very little about the region at the time.

And if you had known that it would be so difficult for the Jewish state?

Golda Meir: That would not have changed my decision to move from the USA to Israel. At the same time, I am sorry that so much misfortune has befallen us and the Arabs. But my conscience is clear. Do you know why?

Tell us!

Golda Meir: The Arabs in this world have a choice of where they want to live. We Jews don’t have that choice. Look at Europe! It is changing economically, politically and morally. What often amazes me is the European tendency to judge conflicts morally from the outside, without really understanding the reality on the ground. Israel was founded out of necessity. Those who criticize us should ask themselves what decisions they themselves would make under the same circumstances.

How do you assess the worldwide criticism of Israel?

Golda Meir: Criticism is legitimate. But it becomes meaningless if it ignores the reality in which we live. No state would act differently if its existence were threatened on a daily basis.

How important is religion to you?

Golda Meir: I am not a particularly religious woman in the traditional sense. I have never pretended to strictly follow every religious custom. But I am Jewish – not only in faith, but in destiny, in history and in responsibility. The State of Israel is above all a home for a people that too often had none. Religion plays a role in this. But what is more important to me is that Jews all over the world know that they are no longer defenceless in Israel.

Do you still believe in a two-state solution?

Golda Meir: I have always believed in pragmatic solutions. But a solution only works if both sides really want it. Peace cannot be achieved unilaterally. I am hopeful. We have not missed a single opportunity to tell the Arabs that we really want peace.

Would it be painful for you to sacrifice Judea and Samaria (the West Bank, editor’s note) for peace?

Golda Meir: Yes, of course it is painful to talk about land that has historical significance for our people. But it would be even more painful if we were to make

decisions that endanger the lives of our citizens. Give me a cigarette, please! (lights a cigarette during the interview) For me, the question has never been what we give up emotionally, but what we can take responsibility for. I don’t really believe that you can buy peace through concessions alone, because you can’t negotiate peace with someone who has come to kill you.

What do you mean by that?

Golda Meir: I am not against compromise. Every peace requires it. But there is a difference between compromise and self-abandonment. If your counterpart does not recognize your right to exist, then you are not negotiating about borders or politics – you are negotiating about your survival. And as head of government, it was my duty to prevent exactly that.

Let’s turn back the clock: you were born in Kiev, the capital of today’s Ukraine, and grew up in the USA. What are your memories of your childhood?

Golda Meir: I can’t remember a single pleasant experience. I remember a much more difficult family situation. We had too little to eat and the constant fear of pogroms. My father, a Jewish carpenter, boarded up the doors because he was afraid of them. Then, in 1906, he decided to move to Milwaukee in the USA in order to be able to feed our family of ten.

Did the events in the Russian Empire at the time turn you into a convinced Zionist?

Golda Meir: The stories about violence, the fear in the faces of the adults – that was all part of my early childhood in Kiev. Zionism was therefore not an abstract idea for me, but a necessity. I understood early on that we Jews needed a place where we could determine our own destiny. In 1921, I persuaded my husband Morris Myerson to emigrate to Palestine. The first three years in Kibbutz Merchawia were some of my best times. After that, we moved to Tel Aviv with our two children.

What advice would you give to young political leaders today?

Golda Meir: Listen less to headlines and more to responsibility! Leadership means making unpopular decisions when they are necessary. Being popular is not a political goal.

You took office in March 1969 as Israel’s first female prime minister and were one of

the first women in the world to head a government. How do you see the role of women in politics today?

Golda Meir: I have never done politics as a woman, but as a politician. But I can see that women have more opportunities today. The decisive factor is not gender, but whether you are prepared to bear the burden of decisions.

What was your biggest political lesson?

Golda Meir: That decisions have consequences that you have to bear yourself. And that hesitation is sometimes more dangerous than a mistake. In my five years as head of government, I couldn’t finish a single dream because I had a direct line to army headquarters from my bedside. We were in a war of attrition. When I started dreaming, I received a phone call…

Golda Meir’s most famous quote – which wasn’t one

During her long political career, Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir made many pithy statements that were fit to print. The most famous was: “Peace will come when the Arabs love their children more than they hate us.”

This sentence has been quoted again and again for decades. But in 2015, extensive research by the well-known American author Harvey Rachlin revealed that there is no evidence that Golda Meir actually said the sentence. Nevertheless, it is still famous today and is still often repeated. This probably has to do with the fact that – as numerous genuine statements by Golda Meir prove – it was in line with her convictions. The Italians say in such cases: “Si non è vero, è ben trovato – If it’s not true, it’s well invented.”

They are talking about the 1973 Yom Kippur War, which Israel almost lost. Around 2600 Israeli soldiers were killed. You agreed to the establishment of an independent commission of inquiry. Why?

Golda Meir: In 1973, we set up the Agranat Commission because the people, the reservists, the families of the fallen and sheer necessity demanded it. The “conceptzia” – our conviction that the enemy would do exactly what we expected – had almost broken our necks. Thousands of our sons were dead. The country was in

a state of shock. As Prime Minister, I knew that if Israel wanted to survive, it had to look itself in the eye.

The results of the investigation triggered public criticism. They had to resign.

Golda Meir: The commission mainly criticized the military and intelligence level – and that was the right thing to do. Nevertheless, I took political responsibility and resigned. Not because the commission condemned me personally, but because a leader who sends his country to war and then runs away from the truth is not a leader.

Should today’s Israeli government also have the mass murder of October 7, 2023 investigated by such a “State Commission”?

Golda Meir: Yes, the Israeli government should set up an independent state commission of inquiry – just as we did after the Yom Kippur War. The massacre of October 7 was an even worse and in some ways even more appalling failure than in 1973. Again there were warning signs that were ignored. Again a fatal miscalculation by the enemy. Again deaths, kidnappings, destroyed communities. The Israeli people have the right – and the duty – to know the full truth.

What questions are you focusing on?

Golda Meir: Who knew what and when? Why was there no mobilization? Why were the border communities so poorly protected? What political and military decisions led to this? These are not questions of left or right. These are questions of responsibility towards the dead, the survivors and future generations. I have never governed Israel with kid gloves. I have led my country with the hard truth. And that is exactly what I expect from those who bear responsibility today.

Note: This interview is fictional. It was created with the help of ChatGPT and is based on Golda Meir’s own statements and writings as well as reports about her and historical film footage. 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 and the third with David Ben-Gurion, the first Prime Minister of Israel.