

Golda Meir

Time Capsule

Biography

Golda Meir was Israel's fourth prime minister and one of the most influential politicians in Israel from the establishment of the state until her death in 1978.

Born in Kiev in 1898, Golda moved to Milwaukee, Wisconsin when she was eight years old. In Milwaukee, she became very active in a Zionist youth movement. She married Morris Myerson in 1921, and the couple moved to Israel to live on Kibbutz Merhavia. Golda was very involved in the Histadrut (the trade union movement) and took various leadership positions in the organization. In the years leading up to Israel's independence, Golda began to play a role in diplomacy, culminating in a secret trip, dressed as an Arab, to try to convince King Abdullah of Jordan to refrain from attacking Israel after the state was declared. In June 1948, Golda became Israel's first ambassador to Russia and was elected to the Knesset for the Mapai party in the first Knesset elections in 1949 and served as the minister of labor. In 1956 she became Israel's foreign minister, and later, after the death of Levi Eshkol in 1969, she became the prime minister and was then re-elected in 1973.

As a politician, Meir was very focused on building up Israel from within while working on relations with the outside world. However, she is primarily remembered as the prime minister who failed to foresee the Yom Kippur War in 1973. People often remember the difficult times more than those that were successful.

The 1973 Yom Kippur War caught Golda Meir's government and the IDF unprepared. Israel was victorious in the war, but the trauma of the initial shock caused much political unrest, and the Agranat Commission was appointed to investigate the war. The commission's report did not directly blame Golda for the lack of preparation, but she nevertheless resigned as prime minister in 1974. Golda Meir died on December 8, 1978 and is buried on Mount Herzl.

Framing

Our goal in this unit is to portray the challenges of leadership and the accompanying successes and failures. Golda Meir is a prime example of strong leadership from whom there is much to learn.

In this time capsule, students will get a glimpse into Golda Meir's life and, specifically, her role as prime minister. Through a model government game they will experience the mechanism of decision-making, including exposure to the challenges leaders face in having to choose between conflicting values and making dramatic decisions that affect many others. In this activity they will practice skills such as ranking priorities, debating, compromising, listening, and decision-making.

Scope

This learning experience can be run in one sitting or split over two separate class periods (60-90 minutes in total):

- Activity #1 ([Timeline](#)): 10 minutes
- Activity #2 ([Ranking Priorities](#)): 15 minutes
- Activity #3 (Model Government Prep): 5 minutes
- Activity #4 ([Video](#)) + Activity #5 (Government Meeting Begins!): 30-40 minutes

- Activity #6 (Closing Discussion): 10 minutes

Preparing the Time Capsule

- For all activities the students should be divided into 6 groups.

Printing:

- Print 6 sets of primary sources for timeline activity (one for each group)
- Print 6 sets of value cards (one for each group)
- Print one set of “tent” cards, preferably in color and on thick paper or cardboard.

Activity #1: Timeline

Each group needs to organize 8 primary sources in chronological order on a timeline of Golda Meir’s life and concurrent historical events. Often this will require looking for clues in the primary sources in order to discover what year they are from. Students can also use the list of hints attached in this [kit](#).

For the correct order and a detailed explanation about each of the primary sources, see the appendix below.

Activity #2: Ranking Priorities

In this activity, students reflect on the values and goals they consider most important and how they inform decisions on a national level.

Each group looks at nine essential values and ranks them in order of importance, using one of the following ranking methods. The students must take into consideration that choosing a certain value means sidelining something else.

- **Ladder ranking:** Place the values in vertical order of importance, with the most important at the top of the “ladder.”
- **Diamond ranking:** Arrange the values in a diamond shape, with the most important value at the top, two values of equal but lesser importance in the second row, three values of moderate importance in the third row, two values of relatively little importance in the fourth row, and the least important value at the bottom.

List of values:

- Strengthening Security
- Social Welfare
- Education
- Good International Relations
- Equality
- Religion
- Promoting Cultural Activities
- Solidarity with the Jewish World
- Building the State

Activity #3: Model Government Prep

In preparation for playing the game, each group is assigned a role in the government and needs to revisit the ranking of the values according to their role. For example, as the ministry of security they might prioritize security, even if initially that value was ranked lower.

Each group receives a [tent card](#) to place on their table. Their role is written on the front and a list of responsibilities and values that are meant to guide their activity and decision-making process is written on the flipside.

Role	Main goals
Ministry of Immigration and Absorption	- Assist new immigrants from their arrival until their integration into Israeli society - Attend to immigrants' housing, employment, and social welfare - Help immigrants contact various institutions and take care of bureaucracy
Ministry of Agriculture	- Plan and develop urbanization - Attend to land conservation and agriculture - Provide veterinary services for wildlife and domestic animals
Ministry of Foreign Affairs	- Represent the state vis-a-vis foreign governments and international organizations - Explain Israel's positions and challenges around the world - Promote Israel's economic, cultural, and scientific relations with other countries
Ministry of Defense	- Strengthen the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) - Promote security research and technology development - Encourage export of security technologies and support local industries
Ministry of Religious Services	- Provide religious services for the Jewish population in Israel, including marriage registration and ceremonies - Supervise the kashrut regulations for religious buildings and synagogues - Develop relations with Jews outside of Israel
Prime Minister	- Formulate policy, mediate between ministries in the cabinet, and conduct cabinet meetings - Determine final decisions while reaffirming the values of the state - Manage diplomatic relations with countries around the world

Activity #4: [Video](#)

The class watches a video of Golda Meir addressing them and explaining the instructions of the game (see below).

Activity #5: Government Meeting Begins!

After watching the video together, the teacher announces the issue on the agenda. (There will be several rounds of the game, each with a different issue.)

Each group has **3 minutes** to discuss and determine their position. A representative from each group then has **1 minute** to present this position to the whole class with an explanation of how it aligns with their role and values. The prime minister group is the last to respond and should make the final decision. Each round should take 10–12 minutes.

There should be 3–4 rounds (depending on time) with scenarios chosen from the following list.

Scenarios and dilemmas on the agenda

- Houses in Tel Aviv and the metropolitan area are crumbling. Homes need to be rebuilt.
- Public transportation infrastructure needs repair. There is a growing need for a train between the center and the periphery.
- The UAE prime minister has invited the Israeli prime minister to visit.
- The army needs 10 new tanks along the Egyptian border (10M NIS each).
- The Jews of Iraq are in danger and are waiting to be airlifted to Israel. Time is of the essence. Soldiers, doctors and five planes are needed.
- The US president is annoyed at the prime minister for not returning a call. The US provides Israel with support, including military supplies, so this needs to be dealt with immediately.

Activity #6: Closing Discussion

The teacher runs a discussion with the whole class based on the following questions:

- What was the most challenging aspect of the meeting?
- Did you feel you had to compromise your values/priorities due to the issue at hand or other ministers' opinions?
- How did it feel to be in the prime minister's role? How did the other groups perceive the prime minister's decisions?
- How did it feel to be pressured for time? If you had more time, what would you have done differently?
- What does it mean to be a good leader?

Appendix: Timeline Activity

Below are the 8 primary sources in the correct order and a detailed explanation about each of the primary sources:

- Letter to the Palestine Shipping Company signed by Golda Meyerson, 1935**
This is a letter addressed to the Palestine Shipping Company that appeared in the Palestine Post on August 25, 1935, translated from the original Hebrew. The signatories, one of whom is Golda Meyerson, thank the shipping company for their journey on the SS Tel Aviv (a passenger and cargo ship on the Haifa-Trieste route), particularly for "the splendid arrangements on the ship, its excellent service, the general use of Palestine products, and the warm Jewish atmosphere which prevailed." They praised the shipping company and described their work as a "pioneering enterprise," adding that the company was performing an important role in extending the borders of a Jewish country across the globe. The company's efforts, they stated, should oblige "Jewish travelers and Palestinian importers and exporters to lend their support towards its fuller development."
The letter was signed by delegates and visitors to the 19th Zionist Congress including many famous Zionist leaders such as Golda Meir, David Remez, Abba Hushi, Shmuel Dayan, Rachel Yanait Ben Zvi (here written Janait Ben Zwi).
- Opening of Tel Aviv-Netanya Road, July 1950**
This is black and white photograph from July 1950 of Golda Meir, then the minister of labor and a member of Knesset from the ruling Mapai party, on the occasion of the opening of the Tel Aviv-Netanya road. Netanya is a city located on the shores of the Mediterranean Sea, 30 km north of Tel Aviv. The city was founded in 1929 and named in honor of the American-Jewish philanthropist Nathan Straus. During its early years, Netanya struggled due to security issues, but it slowly grew and a kindergarten, school, and shops were opened in 1930. A British architect first proposed plans to turn Netanya into a tourist location, and hotels, beaches, and commercial centers were developed. Today the city is indeed a popular tourist resort, and in 2017 had a population of 214,101, making it the seventh largest city in Israel. The city is home to a large number of immigrants from the former Soviet Union, Ethiopia, and, more recently, France.
- Golda Meir – Minister of Labor, April 1954**
The photograph shows Golda Meir, minister of Labor, giving the first maternity grant in Israel in 1954 at Hadassah Hospital, Ein Kerem, Jerusalem to new mother Rachel Mizrahi. Just several hours earlier, on that same morning of April 1, the Knesset had passed the National Insurance Law. On the back of the picture is the stamp of the photographer, David Rubinger, and the Hebrew handwriting gives a brief description of the picture.
As minister of labor, Golda created large infrastructure projects (including housing) to deal with the vast number of new immigrants arriving in Israel. She was also involved in initiating social legislation such as the maternity grant and the National Insurance Law, which protected the rights of vulnerable workers.
- Golda Meir – Foreign Minister, 1956**
This photograph shows a meeting between Golda Meir, the Israeli foreign minister, and 13 men, including her deputy and the Israeli ambassadors to Britain, the United States, the UN, France, and the Soviet Union. Golda Meir is debriefing her diplomatic team just before the Sinai Campaign (Suez Crisis). Golda Meir became Israel's foreign minister in 1956, and within the first few months of office, the Sinai Campaign (Suez Crisis) broke out. The Sinai War was fought by Israel, Britain, and France against the Egyptian invasion of the Sinai desert. After international pressure from the United States, the Soviet Union, and the UN, the forces withdrew from Sinai. Following the war, UN troops were deployed in Sinai and the Strait of Tiran in the Red Sea was reopened to Israeli shipping. 177 Israeli soldiers were killed in the war and hundreds wounded.
- Let My People Go Rally with Golda Meir, Tel Aviv, 1969**
This photograph depicts a solidarity rally that took place in Tel Aviv in support of the campaign to free Soviet Jews. Golda Meir, who became the Israeli prime minister in March 1969, is standing at the podium, preparing to address the crowd below her. Golda Meir was well known for her support for Soviet Jews, and she even went to the Soviet Union as a representative of the Israeli government in

1948. Here Meir is shown addressing the crowd with many journalists around her. Behind her, on top of the roof of a neighboring apartment building, is a group of people watching the rally taking place below them. The location of the rally was probably כיכר מלכי ישראל (Kings of Israel Square). The square is now known as Rabin Square, named after Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin who was assassinated there in 1995 after delivering a speech at a peace rally.

6. [Golda Meets Nixon Cartoon, 1969](#)

This is a cartoon by the illustrator Adar Darian, published in the October 2, 1969 edition of the newspaper Davar. In the cartoon US President Richard Nixon is shaking hands with Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir. Meir is smiling and holding the hand of a little boy who is wearing a “kova tembel” (the hat worn by Israelis in the first half of the twentieth century), thus symbolizing his Sabra status. Nixon is warmly greeting Meir, evident by the way he is using both hands in his handshake. The caption reads: “It was very nice to meet you, Mrs. Meir. Now I understand what a Yiddishe Mama is.” The cartoon was published at the end of Golda Meir’s first state visit to the United States as prime minister. The meeting with Nixon took place on September 26, 1969. Meir spoke very warmly of Nixon, and during the meeting she achieved an agreement for military aid in exchange for US political initiatives and recognition of the United States’ leading role in resolving the conflict in the region. The most significant achievements of her visit was the understanding reached on the nuclear issue and Nixon’s agreement to stop US pressure on Israel. The cartoon is accompanied by a brief and very sympathetic article about the prime minister and her important role in representing the interests of the State of Israel. During Golda Meir’s tenure as prime minister, Israeli relations with the United States were very close.

7. [Judgment Day, Caricature by Dosh, 1973](#)

This is a caricature drawing of Srulik, the cartoon figure depicting the typical Sabra drawn by the Israeli cartoon artist Dosh (the nickname of Kariel Gardosh). Srulik, who represents Israel, has a determined look on his face. He is wearing a tallit, a shofar hangs out of his belt (resembling a pistol from the Wild West), and he has army boots on his feet. In each hand, he holds what appears to be the end of a gun, one representing Syria and the other Egypt. He has successfully managed to twist the guns that were pointing at Israel back towards Syria and Egypt. The headline reads, “The Day of Judgment!” The image was published in the Ma’ariv newspaper and was also distributed to the soldiers fighting in the Yom Kippur War. By this point in the war, Israel had launched a counter-offensive and belief in Israel’s victory was beginning to grow. However, Israelis were still extremely anxious, mistrusted the military and the government who had been caught unawares, and had serious doubts concerning IDF victory.

8. [Golda Resigns as Prime Minister, 1974](#)

Golda Meir had intended to retire in October 1973, but the sudden outset of the Yom Kippur War forced her to postpone her retirement. The war had a great impact on Golda: on the one hand, she had sensed the possibility of an attack by the Arab armies, but on the other hand, her military advisors had informed her that no attack was imminent. During the war, Golda managed to acquire arms from the US, keep her nerve when the government began to discuss the use of nuclear weapons when Israel was suffering heavy casualties, and lead Israel through the difficult war until the final victory. Following the war, the Agranat Commission, set up to investigate Israel’s lack of preparedness, praised her conduct during the war.

Despite being cleared by the commission of direct responsibility, the damage had already been done, and Golda was tired. In her autobiography, *My Life*, she later wrote: “Five years are sufficient... It is beyond my strength to continue carrying this burden.” In April 1974 Golda announced her resignation to the president and the Knesset. Golda Meir died of cancer eight years later on December 8, 1978 at the age of 80.