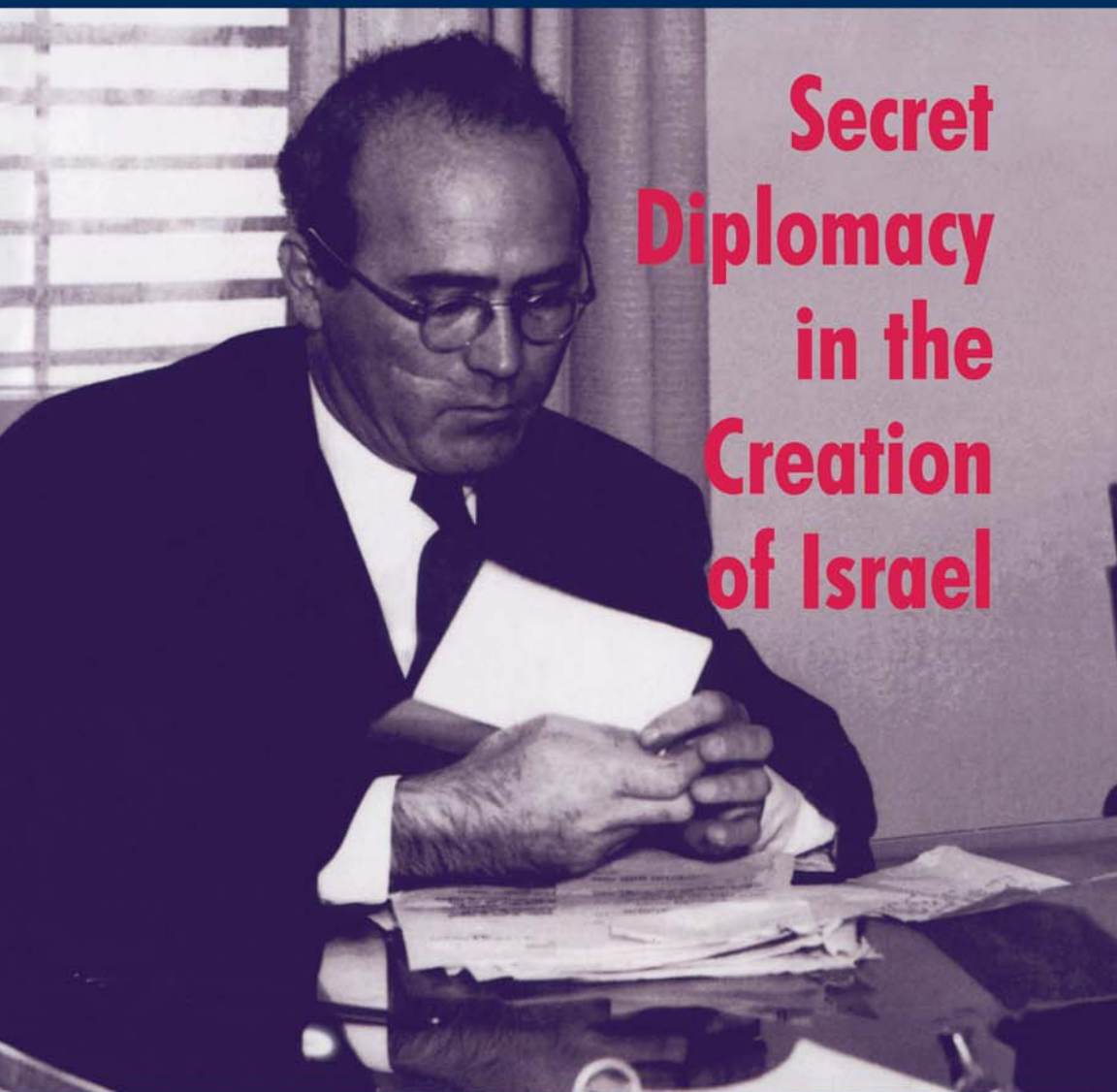


# REUVEN SHILOAH

## The Man Behind the Mossad



**Secret  
Diplomacy  
in the  
Creation  
of Israel**

**HAGGAI ESHED**

Forewords by

**Shimon Peres and Haim Herzog**

REUVEN SHILOAH – THE MAN BEHIND THE MOSSAD

*Secret Diplomacy in the Creation of Israel*



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To My Mother



# Contents

List of Illustrations		ix
Foreword to the English Edition	<i>Shimon Peres</i>	xi
Foreword to the Hebrew Edition	<i>Haim Herzog</i>	xv
Preface to the Hebrew Edition	<i>Haggai Eshed</i>	xix
INTRODUCTION		
Reuven Shiloah: The Man and his Time		xxiii
PART ONE – THE POWER OF THE TRIANGLE		
1 'In' or 'Not In'		3
2 Friends and Enemies		20
3 The 'Tripartite Cooperation' against the Mufti		29
PART TWO – COOPERATION AND DISAPPOINTMENT		
4 'Covert Cooperation' in the Defense of the Country		41
5 The Danger Draws Near and Fades Away		52
6 The Parachuting Operation – Between Evasion and Escape		59
7 'An Element of Evil'		71
8 'We Need an Intelligence Service'		81
PART THREE – TOO MANY DUTIES		
9 From Zaslany to Shiloah		91
10 War on Three Fronts		101
11 The Creation of the Mossad		114
12 The Talks with Abdullah		138
13 The Covert Connection with the United States		164
PART FOUR – THE TERRIBLE FIFTIES		
14 Adjusting and Adapting		177
15 The Circle of Friends		185
16 Neither Security nor Peace		198
17 The First Two Shots		211
18 The American Failure		220
19 A Crisis of 'Deception'		237
20 The Rift Begins to Heal		247

PART FIVE – THE GOOD FIFTIES

21	Back Home	267
22	Integration into NATO and the Periphery	285
23	Revolution in Iraq and the Middle East	295
24	‘One Can Delight in the Fundamental Change’	305
25	‘Until He Burned Himself Out’	315
	Afterword	<i>Yoav Gelber</i> 323
	Index	335

# List of Illustrations

## FIRST SECTION

1. Moshe Sharett and Eliyahu Golomb with their wives, Zipporah and Ada.
2. Zaslany on the tennis court, Baghdad, 1931.
3. Zaslany on the Tigris Bridge, Baghdad, 1931.
4. Dov Hos and his wife Rivka, 'best men' at Betty and Reuven's wedding.
5. Eliyahu Eilat (Epstein) and Dov Hos in Venice.
6. Yitzhak Ben-Zvi, second President of the State of Israel.
7. Charles Orde Wingate, intelligence and special operations officer in the British Army.
8. Reuven Shiloah with General Ahmed Zidki Jundi, head of the Jordanian delegation to the Armistice Talks.
9. Shaul Avigur (Meirov), head of the Aliya (immigration) Institute.
10. Tony Simmonds – British intelligence officer.
11. Reuven Shiloah with Eliyahu (Elias) Sasson and Yigael Yadin.
12. Dr. Ralph Bunche, UN mediator, US General Reilly, head of the UN Observers Force, Shiloah and Lt. Col. Moshe Dayan.
13. Reuven Shiloah talking to Ralph Bunche.
14. Shiloah, Ben-Gurion, Brig. Yigael Yadin, Maj. Gen. Ya'akov Dori – first Chief of Staff of the IDF, and Brig. Yigal Allon.
15. Reuven Shiloah and Moshe Dayan.
16. King Abdullah of Jordan.

## SECOND SECTION

17. Gen. Walter Bedell-Smith, head of the CIA 1950–52.
18. Jim Angleton with Shiloah and Memi De Shalit in Eilat.
19. Angleton with Shiloah and Teddy Kollek.
20. Angleton shortly before his death.
21. The plaque installed in the 'Jim Angleton Corner' near the King David Hotel in Jerusalem.
22. Allen Dulles.
23. Haim (Vivian) Herzog.
24. UN Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld.
25. Philip Klutznik, President of B'nai Brith, and first Chairman of the 'Presidents' Club'.

26. Shiloah with Moshe Sharett and Abba Eban.
27. Shiloah and Abba Eban with Gideon Raphael and Moshe Tov and Cy Kenan, founder of AIPAC.
28. Asher (Arthur) Ben-Nathan.
29. Shimon Peres.
30. Teddy Kollek.
31. Ehud Avriel.
32. Ehud Avriel, Memi De Shalit, Ben-Gurion and Shiloah.

# Foreword to the English Edition

The Israeli intelligence service is known throughout the world as ‘The Mossad’. Reuven Shiloah was among the founders of the Mossad, an organization that has earned itself international renown over the years. The word *mossad* means ‘institution’, and one could say of its founder – Reuven Shiloah – that he was an institution unto himself.

He was one of those rare people that are found in some national governments around the world who deal in the most sensitive aspects of statehood without a clearly defined brief. Trying to define a man like Shiloah in conventional administrative terms is an exercise in futility. Untrammelled as the wind, these people are oblivious to hierarchies or regulations, and create a climate of their own that knows no borders, sometimes toppling trees on the way, while at other times bringing restoration and renewal.

Reuven was possessed of a special grace – he knew how to listen and how to make others listen to him. Whatever he heard he absorbed and processed with amazing speed, and what he wanted others to hear he said softly, forcing his interlocutors to focus their entire being on what he was saying.

An embodiment of the saying ‘still waters run deep’, it is perhaps no coincidence that he chose to be called by the Hebrew name ‘Shiloah’ – the name of a quiet stream that flows near the Old City of Jerusalem, which in Biblical times supplied water through an underground channel to the residents of the city.

And he ran deep indeed. His knowledge of the Arab world, of the Middle East, of events in Washington and the capitals of Europe was unparalleled. Everyone, from all walks of Israeli political life, listened to him, particularly David Ben-Gurion, founder of the State of Israel and its Prime Minister for fifteen years, and Ben-Gurion’s rival, Moshe Sharett,

who trusted Reuven Shiloah implicitly, never once doubting either his loyalty or his expertise.

Reuven was the main source of classified information for the state, but in contrast to the typical Mossad operative, he was also an endless source of new and strikingly original ideas.

It was he who developed the concept of the ‘Periphery’ – creating ties between Israel and the countries beyond the immediate circle of hostile neighbors (the Arab countries along Israel’s borders – Egypt, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon and indeed all the Arab countries – refused in his time to recognize the State of Israel and boycotted it), countries like Turkey, Iran, Ethiopia, Sudan and ultimately some African nations as well.

He harnessed his considerable intellectual energies to the implementation of these ideas, bringing about Ben-Gurion’s personal involvement in meetings with political leaders from these countries to try to establish the effectiveness of this peripheral alliance. This was a groundbreaking idea, but, as is the case with many innovations, it is not only the groundbreaking that determines their fate, but also the construction on the site. In time it transpired that it was difficult to maintain this process over the long term.

Another idea Reuven Shiloah developed was the possibility of Israel’s integration into NATO. We thought that this would deter the Arabs from attacking us, and it is quite possible that if we had been accepted into the European defense organization we might have been spared three bloody wars. David Ben-Gurion asked Reuven Shiloah and myself to crisscross the NATO nations and discuss this possibility with their leaders, and so we did. Most of the NATO member nations agreed, but membership in the organization required unanimous approval by all members, and the Scandinavian countries at that time were opposed to any expansion of NATO, thus bringing Reuven’s initiative to an end.

Reuven Shiloah invested a great deal of time and energy in forging ties between diplomatic and security circles in Israel and the United States, in order to ensure Israel’s qualitative edge in the face of the Arabs’ overwhelming quantitative superiority. But most important of all, Reuven Shiloah never relented or took no for an answer in his unceasing efforts to open doors to ensure support for Israel, or to exploit even the most minute cracks in the wall of Arab hostility. These efforts were made in the dark, but the openings he created remained as open invitations, waiting for the day when it would be possible to widen them and break through to new diplomatic vistas.

Haggai Eshed – a superb journalist, in fact one of the best and most conscientious publicists Israel has known – attempted in this book to

paint a portrait of Reuven Shiloah, to depict his unique personality and extraordinary achievements. As a close personal friend, I know how much thought, talent and emotion Haggai invested in this book.

This book, therefore, is the fruit of a unique combination of the interest and curiosity of an important writer, and the history of a statesman of rare quality.

It is this combination that renders the book a most impressive document with a clear message for the future.

*Shimon Peres*

Tel Aviv

15 Tevet 5757

25 December 1996



# Foreword to the Hebrew Edition

The chronicles of nations are replete with names of great leaders, those men and women who peopled the highest political, diplomatic, military and economic echelons of their country – the policy-makers who stood at the crossroads of vital national issues in times of peace and growth, crisis and war.

Very little, if anything at all, is ever written about the faceless people, those anonymous soldiers who toil behind the scenes in the shadow of their leaders. Yet these unknown men and women very often have a profound and far-reaching influence on the people and the countries they serve. It is they who, far from the limelight, plod through dreary staff work, developing concepts, plans and ideas, working tirelessly to process details, prepare documents, tie up loose ends – in short, do all the complex, unsung groundwork that is necessary for the smooth functioning of government, politics and diplomacy. They are the sword-bearers who make it possible for national leaderships to take action and implement their policies.

One of the most prominent, gifted and highly qualified of these ‘unknown soldiers’ in Israel, who labored in the years immediately preceding the establishment of the State of Israel and the first years of statehood, was Reuven Shiloah. He was a savvy, intelligent and creative man, brimming with ideas, and totally, selflessly dedicated to his work and mission: a man who sought neither glory nor recognition, and always put devotion to duty above the demands of his own personal and family life. His life – everything he had to give – was devoted to the nation and its problems, struggles and needs.

Reuven Shiloah grew up in a religious neighborhood of Jerusalem, and was raised on the wisdom of the Jewish sages, as well as on the fundamentals of Arab culture. In the early 1930s, combining his desire

for higher education with a mission of national importance, he went to work with the Jewish community in Iraq. Upon his return, he immediately immersed himself in a variety of political, diplomatic, social and intelligence activities in the service of the ‘state-in-the-making’.

His duties as confidential advisor to David Ben-Gurion, and as liaison between the Jewish Agency and the British Mandate, prepared him for some of his later duties, such as recruiting Jewish volunteers for the British Army in the Second World War, training and sending volunteer paratroopers behind German lines in occupied Europe and preparing for guerrilla warfare in case of a German invasion of Palestine.

When the State of Israel came into being, Shiloah helped lay the foundations for the fledgling Israeli intelligence community, and was the first Chairman of the Committee of Heads of Services. As advisor to Foreign Minister Moshe Sharett, he was a senior member of the Israeli delegation to the UN-brokered Arab–Israeli armistice talks at Rhodes, and headed the Israeli contingent that met with representatives of Jordan at these talks. He also participated in three secret meetings held with King Abdullah of Jordan, meetings which he used to forge unique diplomatic and military ties.

I first came to know Reuven Shiloah during the War of Independence. He was one of the prime movers behind the creation of Israel’s political intelligence services. He was a highly creative man whose influence on Israeli policy-makers of the time was considerable. His tireless capacity for hard work, the extraordinary breadth of his knowledge, his wisdom and profound analytical ability – all these rendered him a priceless asset for the statesmen he served. During his term as Minister in the Israeli Embassy in Washington, he initiated the first contacts with the Americans on sensitive bilateral issues – contacts that were to prove invaluable in later years.

Reuven Shiloah loved the Middle East and the Arab milieu. He was well-versed in Arab culture, as well as in the diplomatic, social and political structures of the region. It was he who conceived the idea of circumventing the wall of Arab enmity surrounding the country by forging strategic ties between Israel and the more important countries on the periphery of the Middle East, such as Iran, Turkey and Ethiopia.

When he died, his heart consumed by the heat of his selfless devotion to his work, he was still a young man in his prime. I was among a group of friends who decided at the time to commemorate his achievements by establishing a research institute that would bear his name: the Shiloah Institute at Tel Aviv University.

It was admirable on the part of my friend Haggai Eshed, a man of

unique literary and journalistic talent, to research, collate and put into writing the wonderful story of Reuven Shiloah.

This book promises to be an illuminating historical and educational document, as well as a splendid tribute to this most modest, self-effacing man, to whose great exploits and achievements the State of Israel will be forever in debt.

*Haim Herzog*  
Jerusalem  
Shevat 5748  
January 1988



# Preface to the Hebrew Edition

The need to write a book about the life and work of Reuven Shiloah emerged initially out of the shock of his untimely death. He was a relatively young man – not yet fifty years old – when he died, with a record of over thirty years of feverish, incessant activity in the service of his nation. He was a controversial figure, with as many admirers as critics and detractors, but his sudden death unquestionably left a great void in the lives of those who had worked with him at various stages of his life, particularly Moshe (Shertok) Sharett, David Ben-Gurion and Golda Meir. This was the feeling that emerged most clearly out of their eulogies at his funeral. They and others who spoke expressed, directly or circumspectly, their sense of remorse, their feeling that with his sudden passing their chance of giving him his due had been irrevocably taken away. They stressed that in his lifetime he had not been given the opportunity he deserved, that his great potential had not been fully tapped, and that it was somehow their fault that his true promise remained unfulfilled.

All those who knew Reuven Shiloah well were convinced that his fascinating story should be put into writing; that an attempt should be made to somehow decipher the mysteries of the man before they were totally, irrevocably erased from memory. The first attempts were made by his colleagues at the Foreign Ministry, and were, for the most part, unsuccessful. There were simply not enough written records, and the personal recollections – even then – were partial and unsatisfactory. The scattered, piecemeal nature of the written material Shiloah himself left behind made the task of researching his life all but impossible. What is more, much of the material that *was* available was still too highly classified to be made public, either inside the Foreign Ministry or to the public at large. Drafts were prepared, publishable material was collected

and various people were approached to put the material together into a coherent biography. Each attempt was attended by a great deal of initial enthusiasm as extensive plans were drawn up to help meet the challenge – only to peter out again as soon as the first obstacles were encountered. And each time friends and would-be chroniclers retreated from the desire to penetrate the secret of this complex, self-enclosed man, whose tough exterior concealed an inner life, shrouded in necessary and – perhaps – unnecessary secrecy.

A political biography – which is probably the most accurate description of this book – is a difficult task at the best of times. A writer is constantly in danger of losing his objectivity toward the person who, for the duration of the writing, virtually becomes a part of his life, and arouses a growing, unavoidable empathy, despite the writer's professional realization that the success or failure of the writing depends on the ability to remain faithful to the facts, not to gloss over weaknesses or painful failures that might prove to be unpleasant. This book is an attempt to deal not only with the complex and enigmatic personality of Reuven Shiloah, but also with the difficulty of telling his story despite the secrecy surrounding many of the more important details, and the fact that much of the pertinent archival material has only recently been made available for public scrutiny. A few books based on this recently declassified material from the state archives have just begun to appear, and as more documents about this period of Israeli history become available, many more will undoubtedly be written. Despite all these obstacles, and using existing documentation, it has been possible to paint a fairly comprehensive picture of Shiloah's historical milieu, and to describe his place in the events of his time. It goes without saying that there will remain, perhaps forever, blank spaces in this picture, whose impenetrable secrecy is bound to tantalize the imagination for years to come.

This book moves along three interconnected planes: the story of Reuven Shiloah's activities – his political assessments, initiatives and evaluations; a description of his character and the vagaries of his personal history; and of course, connecting chapters describing the historical background of various periods of the Israeli-Zionist saga – the arena in which he operated. I was greatly helped in this task by books already published on the period in question, but based my work primarily on previously unpublished material that is almost entirely in private hands. Much of the book is based on numerous interviews I conducted with people in Israel and in the United States who worked with Shiloah and were willing to talk about him, and about themselves

and the historical events they lived through. A description of the period and its key political decisions will enable the reader to locate Reuven Shiloah in his right place and time and to understand his singular contribution to the formulation of Zionist and Israeli policies, and to the decisions taken by the heads of the Zionist movement and the State of Israel in the first decade of its existence.

I would like to express my thanks first of all to the many scores of people who spared no effort and told the whole unexpurgated truth about the man and his times, each from his or her individual perspective. Our factual memory tends to blur, and we all unconsciously confuse times, events, people and situations. Such is human nature. But memories and impressions after the fact are nevertheless valuable, and provide useful historical testimony, without which it is impossible to reconstruct the prevailing atmosphere of those days. It is in this area that official documents simply lose their effectiveness. It was my great fortune to have been granted access to private archives that were instrumental in creating as true a picture as possible. Without the help of all the people who agreed to be interviewed, this book could not have been written. My thanks, too, to all my friends and acquaintances who briefed and advised me on the specifics of certain issues that the book deals with, particularly to Professor Yoav Gelber and Professor Gavriel Cohen. The assistance given me by friends who knew Reuven Shiloah was invaluable. Chief among them former President Haim Herzog, former Prime Minister Shimon Peres, former Director-General of the Foreign Ministry and top Mossad official for many years, David Kimche, and author Amos Elon – whose professional critique of my work was most instructive. These four graciously agreed to read the manuscript and it was with the help of their incisive comments that certain details in the book were corrected. And finally, it is with great pleasure that I thank my two research assistants – Yaron Ran and later Yael Efrati, who did meticulous work in gathering the available archive materials. I am grateful to them all. The ultimate responsibility for what appears in this book is mine and mine alone.

*Haggai Eshed*



# Introduction: The Man and his Time

Reuven Shiloah was the remarkable product of a distinctive chapter in the history of Israel: a unique period of national regeneration that has vanished, never to return. At no other time in Jewish history could he have achieved what he did or become the man he was. He was *primus inter pares* – first among equals – in a group of ‘operations executives’, men who were neither policy-makers nor decision-makers, but were undoubtedly much more than just ‘senior government officials’ as they would probably be called today. He was a central figure in the momentous transition from the era of the Jewish Agency, the Hagannah<sup>1</sup> and the British Mandate – the period of the ‘state-in-the-making’ – to the era of statehood and a developing administrative and bureaucratic infrastructure. This was a time of difficult and often turbulent growing pains, of innovation, personal initiative and path-finding. It was a period marked by mistakes and mishaps, as well as flights of bold operational imagination. It was in this tumultuous period that the framework of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) was created, literally on the battlefield, and the machinery of national government was generated amid the administrative disarray left behind at the end of the British Mandate over Palestine. It was during this time, too, that the foundations were laid for the Jewish state’s civilian and military intelligence services, a period of clandestine arms procurement and secret border crossings, of alliances forged despite the hostility of an Arab world still licking its wounds following its defeat in Israel’s War of Independence – and refusing to accept the consequences.

It was a period shaped not by institutions, but by people. In the absence of a formal administrative structure, every new instrument of government took on the contours of the people who created it, rather than the other way around as is usually the case. Reuven Shiloah was a

prime example of this spirit – a man who became an institution in his own time.<sup>2</sup>

And yet, despite the unique role he played in this crucial era of Israeli history, somehow Shiloah was left behind as the bureaucracy of Israeli statehood developed. Most of his contemporaries and colleagues from this time of transition soon became ambassadors and directors-general of government ministries – at the center of the new establishment – while he remained forever the lone rider, galloping ahead of the rest until, ironically, he found himself languishing on his own in the rear. He was one of a band of like-minded men in the history of nations: fiercely devoted, far-sighted individualists, ranging far to the fore, only to find themselves eventually choking in the dust of those they thought were behind them. He was the first to identify critical ‘blind spots’ in Israel’s political and intelligence activities, and was equally farsighted in preparing the conceptual and operational tools to close these potentially dangerous gaps. However, his colleagues in the Foreign Ministry and in the Mossad – his own brainchild – proved more adept than he at taking advantage of the tools he developed. The new national leaders and up-and-coming bureaucrats had no compunction about exploiting his considerable abilities and innovative ideas, but neglected to keep him a place in their ranks. In part, of course, this was his own fault: he simply could not find his niche in the new national order. He was not offered any official appointment, and seemed to lack the determination required to take what was his due. These were tragic aspects of his character and destiny. He was, however, possessed of a restless, highly creative mind that spawned ideas and sought solutions to problems at all hours of the day and night, even while reading a book or holding a private conversation. His working life was a non-stop cycle of activity, year in year out, without a pause for either vacations or rest to relieve the tension, a chain of endeavors in the service of the state, which ultimately afforded him no satisfaction whatsoever – neither with his own achievements, with the extent of his colleagues’ cooperation nor with political developments in the country.

Reuven Shiloah was an impressive man with considerable personal charisma. His was a troubling, urgent presence, at once annoying and provocative. Neither he nor his views could be easily dismissed by those who worked with him and knew him, and opinions about him were sharply divided between those who thought highly of him and others who made no effort to conceal their dislike for the man. Cloaked in mystery and radiating an aura of power, Shiloah was always deeply immersed in his work, responding to every call, mobilizing others when

necessary, and, consequently, not easy to approach or befriend. He was a man who emerged from the shadows surrounding the two pillars of national authority in those days – David Ben-Gurion and Moshe (Shertok) Sharett – who shared, unequally, the power to make decisions on all matters of state, foreign affairs, security and the multitude of other issues facing the Mapai Party<sup>3</sup> and the national leadership.

They were the decision-makers and Shiloah was constantly at their side. More than almost anyone else in those circles of the Jewish leadership in Palestine, he understood the complex relationship that bound Sharett and Ben-Gurion, and he knew how to negotiate the hazardous terrain that separated them. Or so, at least, most political insiders at the time tended to believe, adding a great deal of clout to Shiloah's already charismatic status. He became the go-between for many of these two leaders' policy decisions and for much of the classified information they had at their disposal. It was generally believed that if there was anything of importance worth knowing, Shiloah knew about it long before anyone else. His well-known tendency to hold his cards close to his chest caused no little discomfort to people who worked with him, particularly those who did not share the secrets to which he was privy. On the other hand, the aura of mystery surrounding his persona earned him high marks among foreign friends of Israel – British and American, Jew and non-Jew alike. All of them sought his company, treasured his penchant for long conversations deep into the night, admired his comprehensive grasp of the issues at hand and deeply appreciated his proven loyalty to those he counted among his friends. British Intelligence reports from Cairo during World War II described him as 'Shertok's deputy', while American friends of Israel at the time cited him as the man closest to Ben-Gurion. Such was the aura that accompanied him wherever he went.

A small, bespectacled man, Shiloah had gray-blue eyes and a clear, penetrating gaze. In a conversation with Abba Eban,<sup>4</sup> former President of the State of Israel Haim Weizmann once described the experience of coming under Shiloah's gaze '...as though he were examining you by X-ray'. A long diagonal scar on his right cheek, a reminder of shrapnel wounds incurred in a car-bomb explosion at the Jewish Agency building in Jerusalem in 1948, lent his persona a touch of mystery, the shadow of enigma and a hint of covert missions. In fact, the impression was not accurate. As a youth in Jerusalem of the 1920s, he had taken classes at a local acting studio. Although not a born actor, over the years Shiloah learned how to add a measure of theatricality to everything he did. It was as though all his life he played a role in a tale of espionage with a very

small cast of fellow actors, spinning a rich web of fanciful legends and tall tales. He became the butt of many jokes, like the one about the man who gets into a taxi and won't tell the driver where to go because his destination is 'top secret'. He was also jokingly accused of hiding important information from himself, even when there was nothing of any substance to hide.

• • •

Shiloah constantly sought ways of developing intelligence-sharing and strategic cooperation with friendly nations – first with the British and later with the Americans. From the time of the Arab riots of the 1930s (which later developed into what became known as 'The Arab Revolt'), he was among the prime movers behind a concept designed to combine the attainment of political and military power with a realization of the Zionist dream. The concept, which he tried to implement with some variations both before and after the establishment of the state, called for developing operational cooperation on covert intelligence and espionage matters with foreign allies, carrying out 'special operations' deep in enemy territory and seeking political allies in unexpected places. In this way, with the help of well-connected Jewish communities around the world, Shiloah believed that the Jewish community of Palestine – and later Israel – could be turned into a major partner in international diplomacy and intelligence, a force that would have to be reckoned with and with whom it would be 'good to do business'. Was there a country in the world, he reasoned, where you couldn't find Israelis and Jews, all closely knit, with privileged access to a veritable treasure trove of information, often with the added advantage of holding key public and private positions that enabled them to pull all the right strings? Was there a country in the world where Jews did not wield real or imagined power? If the State of Israel were to use these advantages wisely, Shiloah suggested, it could become a 'strategic asset', or a 'strategic partner' – a player on the field of intelligence with access to highly privileged information, and equipped with an almost limitless potential for gathering more. The Jewish community of Palestine, and later the State of Israel, could become an intelligence asset of the first order that would be worth dealing with on a 'give and take' basis in this clandestine world, where diplomatic and strategic information is constantly being either discovered or generated virtually out of thin air.

This was the world Shiloah moved in both before and after the State of Israel was created: a world where projections were made into the

future and where attempts would be made to alter its course; a world of intelligence gathering and dissemination, of disinformation and strategic and political gambits played out daily for the greater benefit of the State of Israel.

He was ‘Mr. Intelligence’, the first among the major functionaries of the Zionist movement and the state-in-the-making to declare outright, at the beginning of the Second World War, that the Jewish community in Palestine and the Jewish state that would come into being in the future needed an intelligence service. Shiloah lost no time practicing what he preached by going about setting up the Israeli intelligence apparatus as soon as he was given half a chance – directly after the establishment of the state.

‘Intelligence’ refers both to information-gathering and espionage, as well as clandestine, top secret ‘special ops’ (special operations) aimed at preempting hostile actions by enemies and opponents, mostly on their own turf; operations for which no one is ever in a hurry to take responsibility and which exist in the vague overlap between the preservation of law and order on the one hand and self-defense on the other, whenever issues of vital national security are at stake. This was particularly true during the period when the State of Israel was being formed, or when protecting and looking after the interests of the Jews of the Diaspora were involved. Given the development of Israeli history since 1948, it is hard to say whether Israel has not remained ‘a state-in-the-making’ even after its formal establishment as a national entity, still wrestling with the same problems with which Shiloah dealt throughout his adult life. What is undoubtedly clear is that this was the case until 1959 – the year of his untimely death.

Every nation has its own intelligence apparatus with its own distinctive mythology. It was the English who coined the term ‘intelligence’ in the image of their unique national temperament – a lifestyle and code of behavior that was predominantly cerebral, based on the joining together of intelligence, insight and a broad knowledge of the facts, and the ability to put all of these elements to discriminating use. Everything in this approach to life favors brain over brawn. To this one must add the romantic aspect of British intelligence – the concept of a sporting contest or duel, where one mind is pitted against another, one gentleman against another, one professional against another. In these contests, when each side invents its own rules of the game in order to survive and accomplish its mission, victory is determined by the superior resourcefulness and ingenuity of a lone combatant operating in hostile territory. This is the archetypal formula of the myths surrounding British

intelligence, espionage and counter-espionage, with their tales of the courageous yet despondent, intelligent yet frustrated loner who, more often than not, comes to a tragic end. Beyond this are other aspects of classic British intelligence tales: the code of personal ethics and discipline, the well-oiled machinery of inter-departmental cooperation and clear-cut divisions of responsibilities and operational areas. It was no accident, however, that beyond this common basis of British intelligence, different periods of history and different regional activities generated a veritable beehive of special services, each devoted to a different aspect of the intelligence world. To each his own.

The British created a vast empire from scratch and defended it almost effortlessly by the judicious application of the ‘divide and rule’ formula: setting their enemies against each other so that the balance of power could be maintained with a minimal use of force.

The Americans, for their part, created an intelligence apparatus that was in fact a massive industry for espionage and ‘special ops’ – a secret conglomerate serving the State Department and the Pentagon, working with them for the most part but sometimes also against them. However, unlike the English model of individual virtuosity, the American system was founded on the efficiency of the system, the ‘Limited Liability Company for the Creation and Marketing of Special Services and Operations’ – the ‘Company’ as the CIA is known. This is an organization that functions virtually as a state-within-a-state, either within the limits imposed on it by the government, or, at times, beyond the pale of the law and in direct opposition to Congressional decisions or to policies established or decided upon by various ministries. The CIA has even been known to operate at times without the President’s – or his aides’ – knowledge or approval. Senior officials do not always know – or do not know *exactly* – what this enormous, globe-spanning organization is doing for them or in their name. What the professionals of the CIA seem to be saying to the ‘amateurs’ voted into office by the people, is that ‘what’s good for us is good for America and what’s good for America is good for us, therefore you must give us your blind trust’. Which is good enough until, from time to time, congressmen or other government officials decide to betray this brand of trust and look into the affairs of the CIA, where they usually uncover peccadilloes committed by one official or another. The official is duly tried and ultimately relieved of his or her duties. But time passes, and invariably someone picks up where his predecessor left off, using more or less the same methods – until his time comes to be caught red-handed and sent packing. And so the system lives on as long as the state is willing to grin and bear it.

During the Soviet regime in Russia, the intelligence apparatus was a 'state-above-the-state' with operational leeway far beyond mere 'intelligence' or 'special ops'. It was a frighteningly powerful, highly centralized and hierarchical organization, dealing in internal and external intelligence of every imaginable kind, zealously devoted to the requirements of 'national security' as it perceived it, and unquestioningly obedient wherever the struggle against so-called 'enemies of the state and the Revolution' was concerned. During the greater part of Russian history – perhaps even to this day – the intelligence apparatus has a vast power base, overshadowing all other institutions of government and civic power, and deeply feared both inside the country and beyond its borders. It was the moving force behind the Soviets' race for an expanded military capability through the development of science, technology and industry. The pace at which these were developed leads one to believe that a major part of Soviet strength in all these areas could be attributed to its espionage capabilities, which could provide its leaders with virtually any information they needed. Most scientists around the world unwittingly worked for the KGB in one way or another, since the all-powerful organization had no trouble simply lifting the fruits of their labor at will. Espionage was conceivably the most important industry in the former Soviet Union.

Traces of all three of these models of intelligence services can be found in the Israeli machinery of government, from pre-state days to the present. The British influence from Mandatory times, for example, can be found mainly in the legal and public administration systems, many of which are still in place in present-day Israeli bureaucracy. The eastern European influence can be found in the administrative and executive government functions which date back to the earliest days of revolutionary socialism – the ideological breeding ground for most of Israel's 'Founding Fathers'. Finally, pervasive American influences have become the models – for better or for worse – in every walk of life in Israel. Although the basic structure of Israeli administration was directly descended from the British formula, all these modes of government left their mark on the Israeli intelligence community in its early years.

From its earliest beginnings, however, Israeli intelligence possessed a unique character of its own that made all the difference. Part of it evolved out of its earliest beginnings – the voluntary underground movements in Eretz Yisrael<sup>5</sup> and outside it during the period of 'the state-in-the-making', before there was a government, an army, an elected parliament or any of the instruments of law and order. Its truly embryonic stages can be found in the efforts of Zionist leaders to protect

people and property in the Yishuv<sup>6</sup> in Palestine and in the Jewish communities of the Diaspora, in the illegal immigration and blockade-running aimed at circumventing the British ban on Jewish immigration to Palestine,<sup>7</sup> the clandestine arms procurement and manufacturing under the noses of the Mandatory authorities, or the Hagannah's 'SHAI',<sup>8</sup> an early intelligence operation aimed at gathering information on Arab intentions. At the same time, the institutions of the Jewish community engaged in an ambivalent relationship with the British authorities, on the one hand cooperating with the army and the police on various security matters, while on the other engaging in clandestine operations aimed at enhancing the Yishuv's military capabilities and trying to do whatever it could to save the remnants of European Jewry during the war and in its aftermath. These were the 'illegal' precursors of the official, legally constituted Israeli intelligence community – including the Mossad.

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Reuven Shiloah was an ideas man, a man of stratagems, not an operative in the field, nor an administrator or an organization man. His fertile, restless mind was not suited to the methodical, routine nature of office work. This was one of the fundamental weaknesses in his character, often exploited by opponents and rivals alike, those efficient 'organization men' of the Foreign Ministry and the intelligence community. Nevertheless, he played such a crucial part in the convoluted, crisis-ridden story of the creation of the Israeli intelligence services that they were profoundly influenced by the innovative strength of his ideas and operational concepts. He was involved in all the stages of Israel's transition to a sovereign state, from the Hagannah to the IDF, from SHAI to the three distinct branches of Israeli Intelligence: the Intelligence Branch of the IDF, the GSS (General Security Service) and the Political Department of the Foreign Ministry, which functioned as a state intelligence organization under various names ('*Da'at*', '*Binah*' and others)<sup>9</sup> until its painful and traumatic dismantling by Reuven Shiloah and the establishment of the Mossad in its place. His successor at the Mossad, Isser Harel, reaped the fruits of Shiloah's labors and inherited a properly functioning, solidly based organization, unencumbered by irksome connections with the past.

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One of Shiloah's major contributions to Israeli foreign policy was the concept of the 'Peripheral Alliance' that he developed after he made the

official move into the area of foreign policy and diplomacy, first as Minister in the Israeli Embassy in Washington, and later at the Foreign Ministry when he returned to Jerusalem. This concept was part of a more comprehensive security strategy that he developed, tailored to fit the needs of a country under siege and surrounded by deep-seated Arab hostility, which called for creating a 'strategic alliance' with the US and Europe, and integrating Israel into the western front led by the US. Both of these concepts, initially proposed by Shiloah, eventually became the cornerstones of Israeli foreign policy.

All this was typical of the man and his destiny – to have others adopt his innovative foreign policy ideas and bring them to their fulfillment after his death. His was the fate of the pathfinders who sow the seeds but never manage to reap the harvest. He suffered many setbacks in his lifetime, but had some important successes as well, which, by their very nature, were ascribed to the State of Israel as a whole. Israel's status today as a strategic asset in American Near East foreign policy is virtually taken for granted, as is its standing as a strategic partner with whom the Americans hold regular annual meetings to discuss strategic coordination and other matters of mutual interest. American foreign aid to Israel, which is unique in its scope, is similarly taken for granted. Shiloah embraced this American orientation from the very early years of the state, at a time when the Americans and even most Israelis showed little interest in it. His ultimate goal was what he called a 'comprehensive affirmative plan' by the West for the Middle East, in which Israel would play a central role, thus reducing the possibility of a confrontation between Israeli needs on the one hand and western interests in the region on the other.

This was not an easy task by any means. The Jewish Yishuv and the fledgling State of Israel that followed it found many potential avenues of development closed off by the powerful influence of Arab hostility and the effectiveness of the Arab boycott on countries trading with Israel. Both before and after the establishment of the state – well into the 1960s and 1970s – one of the main tasks facing the political leaders of the country was to find cracks in this wall of hostility, or to seek ways of circumventing it altogether in order to penetrate the sources of international decision-making: to seek out the ways – known only to a select few – to enter the back rooms where position papers were drawn up or where policy proposals that were to be handed to the political leaders of the major powers for their approval were hammered out.

Reuven Shiloah was the embodiment of this indirect method of diplomatic penetration. Many of the people he worked with at the time

remember his uncanny ability to open any door in the corridors of power – with or without an invitation – the moment he became convinced of its importance to the cause. This style of diplomatic penetration, always oblique, achieved seemingly by accident, or through simple tenacity, was honed by him into a veritable technique: first get your head in, then a foot and you're in.

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Shiloah was the son of a well-known Jerusalem rabbi, Rabbi Aharon Zaslansky, author of many religious tracts on questions of *mitzvot*<sup>10</sup> relating to the Land of Israel, and later in his life honored by the title of Distinguished Citizen of Jerusalem. Over the years the elder Zaslansky changed his political orientation from the well-entrenched traditional Orthodoxy, which was for the most part opposed to the Zionist movement, to the Zionist-oriented Mizrahi Party. His son, Reuven Zaslansky,<sup>11</sup> completed the shift begun by his father, moving from the milieu of his maternal and paternal grandparents in the ultra-Orthodox Jerusalem neighborhood of Meah She'arim, to the liberal, secular world of the Jewish labor movement in Palestine of the 1920s. This became his new spiritual home, the adopted family with which he felt thoroughly comfortable yet where he still remained an outsider, where the central qualities of his character came to light – his utter devotion, zealous motivation and total belief in the aims of the Zionist endeavor. These qualities, as we shall see, were a significant part of the private and public story of Reuven Shiloah.

The art of acting, which he studied briefly as a youth, helped him fashion the persona of a man of power and influence capable of pulling many strings behind the scenes. In his early years of public service this aura served him well, but in his later years, when he tried to come out of the shadows and take center stage, to claim the limelight not as a go-between for other people or issues but as a political personality in his own right – this persona became a drawback. The real political authority he wielded was always unofficial, implicit, based on his important behind-the-scenes activities, and the power, real or imagined, that they gave him. His status as a close confidant of the nation's leaders lent a great deal of weight to his reputation in the eyes of all those who dealt with him professionally. Nevertheless, toward the untimely end of his career, what he truly desired was the official sanction of formal authority that goes with political and diplomatic appointments.

Many of those who knew the man and talked about his achievements,

among them even some of his former opponents, repeatedly, and with genuine pain and regret, raised the question of how a man like Reuven Shiloah was never given even an ambassadorial posting – particularly when they considered some of the other ambassadorial appointments made by the Foreign Ministry after 1948. Former Israeli ambassador to Germany Asher (Arthur) Ben-Nathan, who strongly opposed Shiloah's move to dismantle the Political Department of the Foreign Ministry and create the Mossad in its place, claims that Shiloah was a giant compared to many of those given important diplomatic posts. Ben-Nathan notes that the most frequently voiced excuse – that Shiloah was 'not suited' for diplomacy, that he was most effective in private dealings and was not cut out for public appearances – is facile and unsatisfactory.

Many people who were asked about this after his death, among them some of the public figures who were instrumental in blocking his way in one way or another, were hard put to find a suitable explanation. One of the most prominent of these was Moshe Sharett, with whom he worked very closely for many years, and who used to call him – with a mixture of admiration and bemusement – 'a one-man reconnaissance unit'. But there were many others, including David Ben-Gurion and Golda Meir, who had difficulty finding an answer to a question they never fully articulated in their own minds: what was it about Reuven Shiloah's character and *modus operandi* that prevented him from sticking to the straight and narrow or playing according to the rules of the political game – even at the highest levels of power?

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Certain characteristic elements of Reuven Shiloah's life story followed him even beyond the grave. At a memorial service held in June 1959, thirty days after his death,<sup>12</sup> Teddy Kollek (the long-time mayor of Jerusalem who was then Director-General of the Prime Minister's office) announced the establishment of a research institute for contemporary Middle Eastern studies, to be named after Reuven Shiloah. Kollek told all those gathered at the ceremony that it was Shiloah himself who had originally conceived of such an institute, and in the last few months before his death had actively sought support for the idea. Indeed, in what was to be his last official letter, written on 28 April 1959, less than two weeks before he died, he discussed the subject with the President of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Professor Benjamin Mazar. The timing turned its contents into a part of his last will and testament.

According to Kollek, the aim of the institute would be to promote

scientific investigation into contemporary Middle Eastern issues, and to develop a deeper understanding of present-day regional problems. Research in the institute would concentrate initially on the Arab countries, and would later include Africa and Asia. The institute would also seek the dissemination of Israeli viewpoints on regional problems in various international forums, publish academic research in both journal and book form and cooperate with other institutes for Near Eastern studies around the world. The Institute, an independent body, headed by a Board of Governors and an Academic Committee, was to be established in Tel Aviv as a joint project of the IDF, the Foreign Ministry, the Defense Ministry, the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and the Israeli Oriental Society. Plans for its future development included incorporating the institute as the backbone of a central Institute for Foreign Relations which was being planned at that time.

The Shiloah Institute was duly established at Tel Aviv University, and within a few years gained international recognition as one of the more important institutes of Middle Eastern studies in the world. It was entirely in keeping with Shiloah's life story that the institute bearing his name did not manage – or perhaps did not even try – to produce a single research paper in his memory, devoted to his life and achievements. Reuven Shiloah's activities in the service of the nation during three critical decades of Arab–Israeli relations, or his contributions to the enhancement of Israel's status in the area, to the peace efforts and to negotiations with the Arab countries, in which he unquestionably played a very prominent role, were never the subject of any scientific or historical research. Within a short time, the name 'Shiloah' became simply the name of an institute, and few people involved in its work really knew or cared about the man behind the name. The final irony was even more bizarre: a donor appeared on the scene, seeking a way to commemorate Moshe Dayan, and insisted that the memorial tribute be situated at Tel Aviv University. The result was the creation of the 'Dayan Center' into which the Shiloah Institute disappeared without a trace. It would seem that no man can truly escape his destiny – either in his lifetime or after his death.

#### NOTES

1. The Jewish Agency was established in 1920 as part of the British Mandate, with the aim of representing the Jewish nation before the Mandatory government and cooperating with it to create the 'Jewish national home'. As it developed it became the executive arm of the World Zionist Federation. After the creation of the state, immigration and contacts with the Jewish communities of the Diaspora became its primary responsibility.

The Hagannah was the 'official' military self-defense organization of the Jewish

community in Palestine before the establishment of the state, and the military formation that fought Israel's War of Independence. There were a number of rival, so-called 'underground' organizations that operated mainly against the British at that time.

2. There is an untranslatable pun here: the Hebrew word for 'institution' is '*mossad*', the name that was given to the widely known Israeli Secret Intelligence Service (ISIS).
3. Mapai – an acronym for Mifleget Po'alei Eretz Yisrael, the Workers' Party of Palestine, a Zionist-Socialist party founded in 1930, which played a central role in all the Jewish institutions in Palestine before the establishment of the state, and was the ruling political party in the State of Israel from 1948 to 1977.
4. Former Israeli Ambassador to the United Nations, and later Foreign Minister.
5. lit., 'The Land of Israel' – the name used by the Jewish community of Palestine to designate the country before the establishment of the state. On all official documents in Hebrew the country was known as 'Eretz-Yisrael-Palestine'.
6. *Yishuv* literally means 'settlement', but by extension it became the name for the pre-state Jewish community in Palestine as a whole.
7. At various times during the Mandate (1922, 1930 and 1939) the British government published White Papers that limited, in one way or another, Jewish immigration to Palestine. The most painful of these, as far as the Jewish people were concerned, was the last one which made it virtually impossible for the remnants of the Jewish communities of Europe fleeing the Holocaust to enter into Palestine. The *Yishuv* fought these edicts officially by trying to bring pressure on the British government, and illegally by bringing in thousands of refugees through the British blockade of Palestinian waters.
8. Abbreviation of the Hebrew '*Sherut Yedi'ot*' – Information Service.
9. *Da'at* in Hebrew means knowledge and *binah* means wisdom.
10. The Hebrew word for religious duties. According to rabbinical tradition there are 613 such duties in the Bible.
11. During all the pre-state period, Reuven Shiloah was known as 'Zaslany', a variation on his original family name – 'Zaslansky'. After the establishment of the state, he officially changed his name to his intelligence code-name: 'Shiloah'. He will be referred to here as 'Zaslany' up to 1948, and subsequently as 'Shiloah'.
12. According to Jewish tradition, on the thirtieth day after a death – known as the '*shloshim*' (thirty in Hebrew) – the members of the family go up to the cemetery to unveil the tombstone and hold a memorial service.



PART ONE  
THE POWER OF THE TRIANGLE



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## ‘In’ or Not ‘In’

Reuven Zaslany was a teacher by profession and inclination. He completed his teachers’ training between the years 1923 and 1928 at the Hebrew Teachers’ Seminary in Jerusalem, which at the time was a first-rate institution with a unique faculty and student body. The school was noted for its scholarly atmosphere, and its faculty list read like a *Who’s Who* of Jewish educators, many of whom have long since become a part of the history and folklore of Jewish education in Eretz Yisrael: the principal and founder of the Seminary was the founder of the Hebrew Language Committee and the Teachers’ Federation, David Yellin, and his deputy was the historian and future Minister of Education, Ben-Zion Dinur (Dinburg). Both of them were held in high regard by the students. The Bible and Hebrew language teacher was H. A. Zuta, and the Geography teacher was A. Y. Bravver. Ben-Zion Netanyahu (father of Yonatan ‘Yoni’ – of Entebbe fame– and Binyamin ‘Bibi’– leader of the Likkud Party and subsequently Prime Minister) who studied with Zaslany at the Seminary, remembers the teachers as ‘very professorial. They were in fact university-level lecturers – all unusually interesting and highly idealistic who comported themselves with great dignity. They came to Eretz Yisrael as committed Zionists, and took their jobs very seriously.’ Netanyahu particularly remembers Bravver who was a very strict and demanding teacher. ‘But Reuven and I liked him a great deal’, Netanyahu recalls. ‘We frequently went on hikes with him throughout the country. Bravver would ride on a donkey and we’d follow behind on foot – in the Judean Desert, to places like ‘Ein Farah and Wadi Kelt. We spent a lot of time visiting the monasteries there. We loved hiking, and traveled throughout the Galilee and the Negev Desert. That was during the 1920s which was one of the most peaceful times of the Mandate.

‘Reuven Zaslansky’, Netanyahu recalls, ‘was an outstanding student,