

## Ben-Gurion's personal trainer

**He was the first Jew to get a black belt in judo. He invented an internationally popular form of exercise, and he taught an aging prime minister to stand on his head. But Moshe Feldenkrais, whose centennial is being celebrated this summer, was not an easy person. His `disciples' recall his idiosyncrasies - and his genius.**

By Aviva Lori

If Moshe Feldenkrais were alive today, he would be looked to as a New Age god. All those returning from India, all the `alumni' of Goa and Ushu, would almost surely have looked to him as a guru and sought out his touch. But the fact that Feldenkrais died 20 years ago, in his Tel Aviv apartment, won't be stopping his disciples all over the world from marking his 100th birthday this summer. New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg got a jump on the festivities when he declared May 2004 as "Feldenkrais Month" in the city.

In recent months, in various places in the United States, Canada and Europe, there have been a host of conferences and tribute events marking the centennial birthday of the person who developed a form of exercise that works on the body and the mind simultaneously. At the end of the month, followers in Tel Aviv will hold a day-long seminar and a festive evening in his honor. "If he's seeing and hearing this from above, he'll definitely be pleased," says Maya Segal, who was one of the first students of the Jewish man who was born in the Ukraine, graduated from the Gymnasia Herzliya at age 23 and then went to the Sorbonne to study physics - and not for the purpose of becoming Ben-Gurion's personal therapist.

### Without surgery

Moshe Feldenkrais was the son of Sheindel and Avraham Leib, both ardent Zionists. Avraham Leib was an ordained rabbi but worked as a lumber merchant. They saw to it that all four of their children knew a little Hebrew. After Moshe, the eldest, came Yona (who died at age 12), Baruch and Malka. When Moshe was 14, he joined a group of youths who immigrated to Eretz Israel. They were called the "Bernovich group," after the town from whence they came. His parents and brother Baruch arrived in the country some years later. (Baruch grew up to become a publisher and owner of a publishing house called Alef Press - the name was derived from his father's initials.) The Bernovich group settled on the border of Jaffa and Tel Aviv and worked in construction. Among other things, they helped build the Great Synagogue on Allenby Street.

As a teenager, Moshe Feldenkrais was a gifted athlete and played soccer every day with his friends. "One day, they were playing soccer and Moshe was injured in the knee and was in the hospital," relates his nephew Michel Silice-Feldenkrais, who added the name Feldenkrais to his own surname after his uncle's death. "The situation was critical and they wanted to amputate his leg, but he absolutely refused. It took a very long time for the knee to heal. In the meantime, he read books that he'd brought from the Ukraine, especially math and physics books."

Years later, when Feldenkrais moved from France to England, the knee started to bother him again. "When I was in England, I started having water on the knee and the doctors diagnosed a [problem with the] meniscus [i.e., cartilage]," he told Haaretz in a 1964 interview. "I had a black belt in judo then, but the knee was really bothering me and I had to spend more time in bed than I did walking. I went to Glasgow and asked a big specialist there what my chances were. `The contact surfaces of the joint are in such a condition that the knee will stick and remain straight and you won't be able to bend it,' he told me. I said, `Don't operate in the meantime.' And the specialist replied: `You'll have to come back in three weeks. You won't be able to stand the pain.'"

Feldenkrais never went back. He decided to heal himself. He studied the movement of the knee, he searched for alternative methods of treatment, he altered his posture and his manner of walking until he finally achieved his objective. The knee was saved without surgery. This research ultimately gave momentum to his entire exercise doctrine.

Feldenkrais' interest in the exact sciences did not do anything to help his meager Hebrew and he only applied to the Gymnasia Herzliya when he was close to 20 years old. After completing the matriculation exams, he saved money for about two years and then went to Paris. Silice-Feldenkrais: "He wanted to study medicine, but it cost a lot of money so he studied electrical engineering and, to help pay for his studies, he started to do Jujitsu. There was a German fellow who'd taught it to him in Israel and the rest he learned from books."

In Paris, in addition to his academic studies, Feldenkrais embarked on an athletic career. He became friends with the director of the school he was attending and persuaded him to let him open a Jujitsu studio there. The director was enthusiastic about the idea and Feldenkrais taught judo there as well. (He would eventually become the first Jew to hold a black belt in this martial art.) In Paris he also got married - to an Israeli medical student, Yona Rubinstein. They divorced three years later. They had no children and he never remarried. Before World War II, he managed to bring his sister Malka (Michel's mother) to Paris.

### The correct movements

Feldenkrais lived in Paris for about 10 years and earned a doctorate in applied physics from the Sorbonne (where he worked in the lab of Irene Curie-Joliot, the daughter of Pierre and Marie Curie, who, like her mother, also won the Nobel Prize for Chemistry). When the war broke out, he fled to England and worked there for the British navy, helping to identify enemy submarines. He also wrote his first book there, called "The Body and Mature Behavior: A Study of Anxiety, Sex, Gravitation and Learning" - the first of eight books that he wrote, all of which were translated into dozens of languages.

After the war, he remained in London and worked as a scientific officer in the British Admiralty, in the submarine-identification unit, and also developed his exercise method and began teaching groups and treating people. The underlying premise of his method was his observation that, over the course of their lives, adult human beings - unlike babies who naturally move their bodies correctly - adopt harmful and damaging habits of movement. By means of tiny, sometimes imperceptible movements, Feldenkrais showed how it is possible to restore correct ones.

In addition to drawing on his personal experience, Feldenkrais also put his knowledge of martial arts and his scientific knowledge into the development of his method. Its basic tenet is that human movement is an amalgam of its various components. "Movement is life. Life is a process. Improve the quality of the process and you'll improve the quality of life," Feldenkrais said. To that, he added other metaphysical ideas. In order to improve movement, he maintained, one needs understanding and awareness; the mind and body must be connected and complement each other. In the first stage of the process, the ultimate goal is not important - the path and the process itself are more important. If people keep improving along that path, they'll reach the goal in the end.

These were bold statements at a time when physical education held brute strength and ambition in esteem. At a time when exercise classes were very demanding and strenuous, Feldenkrais sat his students down on mats and asked them to gently move the knee to the shoulder or the elbow to the foot and to repeat the movement many times, without strain or force.

This innovative approach gained him a handful of admirers, including Prof. Noa Eshkol, daughter of Levi Eshkol, who was working in London at the time on a system of writing to denote movement (using recognized symbols to indicate potential combinations of body movements), who became a good friend of Feldenkrais. Most people didn't understand what he was talking about. Scientists completely ignored him.

"He was light-years ahead of his time," says Segal, who met Feldenkrais in 1957 in Tel Aviv and worked with him for almost 30 years. "Only now are scientists speaking openly about the unity of the body and mind, and about the influence of thought and emotions on a person's physical condition. When he said this way back then, his scientist friends were aghast."

### **Transforming Ben-Gurion**

In the early 1950s, Feldenkrais was persuaded to return to Israel to work in the defense industry. For two years, he worked in the Science Corps (known by the Hebrew acronym "Hamad"), at a defense installation in the Haifa area. "When I was at Hamad, we heard that in London there was a Jew working in the field of rocket science," recalls Prof. Ephraim Katzir, who was the Hamad commander at the time. "At the time, we were developing a small rocket and were having trouble with the thrust, so I thought that we ought to bring this Jew here. I asked Ben-Gurion for permission to go to London to bring him here and he agreed, and Feldenkrais joined the group that worked on the rocket's production. But, unfortunately, within a few months, we saw that he really didn't know anything about rockets."

It was that bad?

Katzir: "He'd worked in the field, but apparently at a very low level. We laughed when he built us a model of a rocket that looked like a mushroom. It might make an interesting exhibit, but it will never fly, we said. He had a broad scientific background. He was a modern physicist, but he didn't understand anything about rockets. When we heard about the exercise method he was developing, we encouraged him to focus more on that and less on rockets. A lot of people were interested in Feldenkrais' methods, and one of them was my brother Aharon who recommended him to Ben-Gurion, who was very enthusiastic when he heard about it. I was more skeptical. But he was certainly an extremely bright person - we'd just made the mistake of thinking he knew more about rockets than he did."

Feldenkrais left his job at Hamad and moved to Tel Aviv. At first, he lived with his brother and mother, and later moved to his own apartment on Frug Street. In 1952 he began working in Dvora Bartonov's studio. Yohanan Ribrant, a physics teacher in Givatayim at the time, who later became Feldenkrais' first assistant, came to exercise with him.

"For 15 years, I went to him once a week," he says. "The thing that especially intrigued me was his being a first-rank scientist. I see his whole method as a scientific achievement, because a man of science doesn't have answers - he only has questions and theories. Some of these theories are adopted and some are left behind. The search for answers is typical of the whole method."

Ben-Gurion, Feldenkrais' most famous client, came to him through Prof. Aharon Katzir (who was killed in the terrorist attack on Lod airport 32 years ago). Katzir promoted the establishment of the "Institute for the Coordination of the Body and Spirit," to be run by Feldenkrais. When he sought Ben-Gurion's assistance in raising funds for the project, he also told him about Feldenkrais' amazing method. The meetings took place daily in Ben-Gurion's home and no one knew about them.

"Ben-Gurion found time for these sessions even in the most difficult times," Feldenkrais said in one interview. "One of the most difficult times was when [then finance minister] Levi Eshkol, [Ben-Gurion's military adviser] Nehemiah Argov and government ministers were in his home awaiting President Eisenhower's phone call, in which he was expected to ask Israel to withdraw from the territories it captured in the Sinai Campaign. Ben-Gurion left them all and went upstairs for his exercise session. When the phone rang, he took the message from the president of the U.S., but didn't get up from the bed. He kept going with the treatment as if

nothing had happened and only went down to the living room a half-hour later and told the others what the president had said."

Paula Ben-Gurion, however, didn't care much for Feldenkrais and used to say, "Here comes Mister Hocus-Pocus" when he showed up. When Feldenkrais opened a studio on Nahmani Street for private treatment sessions, Ben-Gurion preferred to go there.

The connection between Ben-Gurion and Feldenkrais became public knowledge in 1957. Ben-Gurion had gone down to the Herzliya beach with bodyguards, a bathing suit and newspaper photographers in tow, and then, to the astonishment of all - he stood on his head. That moment was preceded by an entire year of quiet preparation.

"Ben-Gurion had a terrible body image. He was short and he'd told Moshe that even as a boy, he wasn't able to stand on his head," says Eli Wadler, a student of Feldenkrais and a teacher of the method. "Moshe got the hint. He gradually taught him how to bend down, how to tuck his head in, how to go up on his knees, how to hold the buttocks straight - he worked with him one muscle at a time until finally it was the most natural thing for Ben-Gurion to stand on his head. When it happened, he was very proud ... You have to lead the person there the whole way. He didn't tell him, 'Go do it on the beach now,' but he gave him the tools."

After that, at every opportunity, Ben-Gurion would stand on his head and tell the world (and his wife) about his mentor Feldenkrais. In 1958, Ben-Gurion still believed that the Israeli government would give the Feldenkrais Institute all the necessary support and even supplied a letter confirming this. No institute came out of this, but the letter and the connection with Ben-Gurion opened doors for Feldenkrais in Israel and abroad. His clients included a broad range of local and international figures, including Yehudi Menuhin, Margaret Mead, Levi Eshkol, Moshe Dayan, Meir Weisgal, Nahum Goldman, Betty Ford and Yitzhak Ben-Zvi.

"Israel didn't appreciate him properly," says Noa Eshkol, now 80. "He was a special man, an autodidact, a great and bold inventor. He invented a compass that draws ellipses, a special type of eyeglasses and all kinds of other patents. In his childish way, he really wanted respect. I prepared a file - I tried to nominate him for the Israel Prize, but I was told that there wasn't any rubric that suited him. He's renowned throughout the world and only here, they can't figure out where to fit him in."

### **A difficult person**

In the early 1960s, Feldenkrais was already quite well known. In North Tel Aviv, on Alexander Yannai Street, he opened a large studio of his own. "Alexander Yannai" became a mecca for Feldenkrais' followers. In the latter half of that decade, due to the fast-growing demand, he decided to train a group of teachers to help him, and inaugurated his first Feldenkrais teacher's training course. The participants were the "13 wonders" - the cream of the crop, selected from all his students. The course was held every day for three years and cost a fortune in that era's terms: 200 liras a month. Wadler, 61 and currently the Feldenkrais coordinator at the Wingate Institute for Physical Education and Sports, returned from studying physical therapy in Germany in 1966. "Someone asked me if I wanted to see something interesting and different and she took me to Alexander Yannai. She was a pretty girl and she was lying beside me on the floor and so - thanks to her - Moshe also noticed me. One day, he came up to me and said he was starting a course to train a group to teach his method."

The very intensive course and all the togetherness it entailed brought out strong feelings that were liable to go either way: to great admiration or great aversion. His student, Segal: "He was a wonderful teacher, very charismatic and smart. He had a lot of charm and brilliance and sensitivity."

But Feldenkrais was not an easy person, apparently. He was often blunt and impatient, and used to scream at his students and amuse himself at their expense. Some people who knew him said that he was a hedonist, that he loved women and fine food and had many romantic adventures, though he never thought of remarrying. Wadler remembers him saying once: "What woman would want to live with me when all I do is work all day and read all night?" Others described him as stingy.

Eshkol: "He was known for being miserly. People imagined he was raking in a lot of money, which was somewhat true, but he was generous to me, at least. He was an extraordinary, funny and childlike person. It is true that he loved to eat and would eat from everyone else's plate."

### **Tough but gentle**

Feldenkrais demanded all the attention, says Hava Shalhav, one of the 13 who met Feldenkrais in 1956 when she was studying physical education at the Seminar Hakibbutzim teachers' college. When he was around, no one else could get a word in edgewise. "He was a narcissist," she says. "He loved the good life, he liked to be around famous people. There are people who admired him and people who didn't, but he was unquestionably a genius in his time, a highly original person in his ability to connect different theories."

His student Shlomo Efrat, today almost 90, dismisses all the gossip and says that it's more important to talk about Feldenkrais' real contribution - putting the focus on the sense of self, awareness of the self and the environment. However, he adds: "I remember him demonstrating to us with one woman from the group. He said that there was a cement wall between her and her understanding. He was equal parts toughness and gentleness."

Wadler agrees that Feldenkrais tended to impatience at times. "He spoke rapidly, thought rapidly and sometimes, when he explained something that was clear to him and people didn't understand, it really irritated him. But to say that he was a cheapskate is utter nonsense. I'd like to see the cheapskate that would give lessons to everyone the way he did. I didn't pay him for the course for at least two years. It was very expensive in those day's terms and I didn't have the money. He didn't tell me not to come. Afterward, when I started to make money, I came to pay him in full and he just put the money in his pocket and didn't even count it."

Not in your case, but Shlomo Efrat recalls how, when he came to pay him \$1,000 that he owed him, he went through the pile of bills and murmured something about a few dollars that were missing.

Wadler: "What kind of miser would let you take a course for free? I think there was some remarkable generosity there. Yes, he embodied a lot of contradictions - he was very curious and innocent like a child, on the one hand, and an expert on everything, in the most profound way, on the other. He had to prove that he knew everything the best in the world."

"He didn't have patience for other people's foolishness," says Ruth Alon, who was a teacher on Kibbutz Alonim, attended Feldenkrais sessions at Alexander Yannai and later was one of the first 13 in the teachers' training course. Today Alon teaches Feldenkrais here and abroad, and has added to it her own interpretational method that includes special exercises to strengthen the bones.

"Sometimes he would shout things like: 'You're an engineer, but you don't know your right from your left. How can you not see this?'" she recounts. "But then he would go back to being his nice self again. It was part of the show. He was a real showman - otherwise he never would have put himself on the map - but when he took a person to treat him, he was all patience and gentleness."

Hava Shalhav remembers that Feldenkrais had a short fuse, but she forgave him. Seth Levy, a film director who became enamored of the Feldenkrais method, recently completed a film about the first 13 students, and in the film, Shalhav - who has developed Feldenkrais for children and infants - says that she forgives Feldenkrais for all the insults that he heaped on them, for calling them idiots. "Some people didn't like his personality. He could be very crude and offensive. He couldn't abide people who didn't get it, but it wasn't personal when he called us idiots. You can't take it personally even though there are students today who imitate him, who think that maybe that's part of the method, and I say that what's okay for the master isn't always okay for the students. He was very theatrical. With him it was part of the show."

### **Breakdown in Zurich**

The legendary course that ended in June 1971 left its 13 graduates with a whole world of opportunity before them. Each one went on to develop the method and advance it in different directions. When Wadler, for example, talks about Feldenkrais today, he talks about sculpting. "We sculpt the person into what he can be," he says. In 1975, Feldenkrais was invited to give a course in San Francisco. He had 65 students there. He taught there for three years, interspersed with travel throughout the world. He left Alexander Yannai in Wadler's hands, and Wadler continued teaching using videotapes that Feldenkrais had left behind.

"Moshe recorded every lesson," says Silice-Feldenkrais. "He made over 600 videotapes and they are still used."

In time, different levels of status came to exist among his select students, too, with those whom Feldenkrais chose to accompany him abroad considered to be on a higher level than those who remained in Israel. That distinction still seems to hold. "Eli just pushed the button," Shalhav says of Wadler. "He wasn't allowed to add his own comments or teach himself. He stayed here to guard the tapes."

In 1980, Feldenkrais started another course at Amherst College in Massachusetts, with 250 students. That course was supposed to last for four years, but in 1982, Feldenkrais became ill; his students from Israel completed the teaching for him. "He worked very hard in between courses, too," says Silice-Feldenkrais. "He was constantly traveling from place to place. And one day, when he was almost 80, he arrived in Zurich and collapsed." The diagnosis was a blood clot in the brain.

After a lengthy recuperation in Switzerland, Feldenkrais returned to Israel and "continued to give a few sessions, and then he had seven strokes, one after the other," his nephew recalls. "In his last month, we took him home from the hospital and he had a nurse 24 hours a day. It's interesting that at the end, he wouldn't let any of his students come near him. When he died, my mother, who managed all his worldly affairs, was in the U.S. In the meantime, we kept him at home because we wanted her to be able to see him. We put Moshe on the floor, we put dry ice on him that I got from a friend at El Al, and placed two candles beside him. I called a lot of people to tell them that Moshe had died, including Noa Eshkol, who was his best friend. About an hour later she rang the doorbell, asked where Moshe was, went into the room and lay down next to him on the floor."

Eshkol: "He was very beautiful and peaceful. I was with him the whole night. I lay on the floor next to him and that's how I said good-bye to him because I don't like funerals. He wanted very badly not to die. He wasn't prepared to die until he knew the secret of gravity. When he was sick, in his last days, he was treated by a regular physiotherapist from the hospital, there was no Feldenkrais. I love him and miss him very much. He was a nice schlepper. He really wanted to have a school in Israel, but they didn't make him one."

### **Rules of the Federation**

In 1990, the International Feldenkrais Federation (IFF) was founded in the United States; it serves as an umbrella organization for Feldenkrais associations in different countries. There are an estimated 7,000 certified Feldenkrais teachers in the world today. In Israel there are about 600, of whom about 400 are actively working in the field. The rules of the federation are quite strict. A student can be certified only if he has studied with a certified teacher in a course approved by the federation, and then tested by representatives of the federation, says Eitan Sarig, a certified Feldenkrais teacher and chairman of the Israeli Feldenkrais association.

These days it's the Americans who dominate the field and dictate the rules of the game, say Israeli teachers. If Feldenkrais himself had to take their tests, they add, he might not pass and be accepted by the federation.

