

The Man Who Stood On His Head The Prime Minister

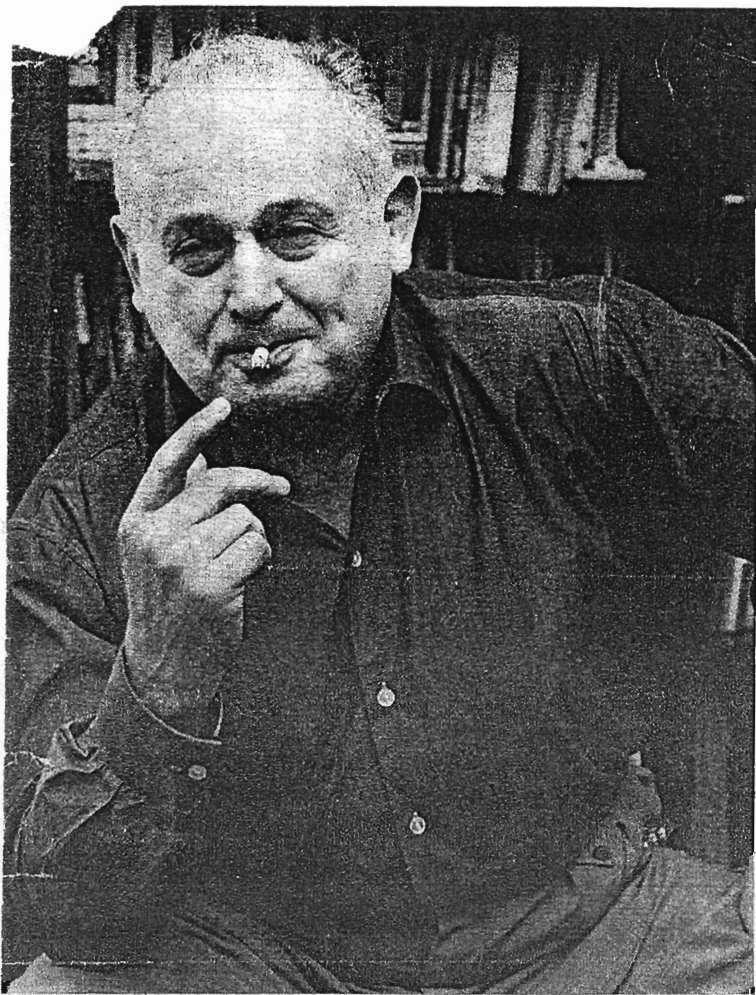
In the flow of visitors to Israel there are always a few who do not come to see the biblical sites or the wonders of Zionist reconstruction; they slip in quietly and seek out a certain address in Tel Aviv. They're looking for the man who made David Ben-Gurion stand on his head.

They find him in his "classroom" in a rather grimy Tel Aviv walk-up. He is a chunky, remarkably agile, elderly person who looks middle-aged, with a large, round head and untroubled, penetrating eyes. With a wink, he calls himself "a quack." Dr. Moshe Feldenkrais is said

AN ARTICLE

BY MEYER LEVIN





Though not a medical doctor, Israel's Moshe Feldenkrais is sought out by patients from all over the world. Labelled a "quack" by some, he nevertheless has had remarkable success in treating many so-called hopeless cases.

to have the largest income of any professional man in Israel. He is not a medical doctor—though, having a tongue as nimble as his limbs and a Ph.D. in physics, he might semantically claim to be a physician.

The doctorate in physics comes from the Sorbonne and belongs to the Paris period when Moshe Feldenkrais worked for nine years with Frédéric Joliot-Curie at the radium institute. His present work in Tel Aviv has nothing to do with radium treatment, however, for Feldenkrais long ago abandoned physics for physical culture. He is, quite simply, a healer. His fame has become international.

In any one period, a string of Feldenkrais pilgrims may be found living in the leading hotels of Tel Aviv; in the past, these have included a Maecenas from Madagascar, a diamond king from Johannesburg, a colonist from Kenya and even an ailing professor of medicine from Teheran. The healer's Israeli clients still include the former Prime Minister, David Ben-Gurion, as well as other members of the elite. But in addition to giving private health lessons, Feldenkrais also holds classes where people from all walks of life may be encountered, and among them are some who could not walk before.

He treats spastics, asthmatics, people suffering from slipped discs, from sciatica, lumbago and other muscular disorders; he has had remarkable results with a variety of psychosomatic cases and has helped victims of car accidents who were given up as hopeless cripples.

Yet Moshe Feldenkrais is anything but a "faith healer." He is an arresting personality with a lifelong thirst for learning, a highly cultured man who may be seen at every symphony concert and at art openings. His wide-ranging mind has brought together ideas and knowledge from various fields, as far apart as judo and psychoanalysis. It is only an accident that Feldenkrais did not pursue a degree in medicine; he has made up for this by his enormous reading in the subject, and though certain members of the medical profession sneer at him, others send him a steady flow of clients.

Soft-voiced and anything but aggressive in manner, Feldenkrais tends to be a listener rather than a lecturer. When seated, he gives the impression of a competent, round-headed intellectual type, an expert, always alert. But in motion, he at once exerts a dynamic energy. His hands are sensitive, alive, the hands of an artist. His smallest body movements, his simplest steps—a mere walk across the room—project an extraordinary quality of balance, control and power.

Though short and deceptively stout in appearance, Feldenkrais keeps himself in excellent condition, and at the slightest challenge, on the beach or at social gatherings, will turn a series of cartwheels or perform surprising tumbling feats.

A bachelor, he is rather a notable ladies' man. His graying hair still has a crisp curl, while his warm, candid eyes exert a most definite appeal. Feldenkrais lives alone in a book-and-records-filled apartment furnished with rather heavy, comfortable leather chairs. He lives on a quiet side street, only a few steps from Tel Aviv's lively Dizengoff Square.

At parties, he is likely to remain observant and reserved, though if one can get him to talk about his ideas and work, Feldenkrais proves a fascinating raconteur. His acquaintanceship is wide, particularly in artistic and scientific circles.

Some of his long-standing, constant friends are among the research physicists of the Weizmann Institute, and it was indeed one of them who recommended him to Ben-Gurion. But the physicist-healer is just as likely to turn up at a gathering of writers and painters. His chief assistant, Mia Segal, is the wife of one of Israel's leading architects, Maurice Segal, and Feldenkrais is frequently seen in their company.

Legends about the Feldenkrais thirst for learning go all the way back to the early days of Zionism, when idealistic young pioneers, called *chalutzim*, were arriving from Europe to "build the land" with their bare hands. Virtually the first structure to be built in the new city of Tel Aviv, on the sands near Jaffa, was a high school, or "gymnasium" in the European sense, and old-timers recall how a young *chalutz*, athirst for education, moved a pup tent into the courtyard—and stayed. That young man was Moshe Feldenkrais.

Some years later he found his way to Paris. Restless after his long, cramped sessions in the laboratory, Moshe sought intensive exercise. Since everything is to be found in Paris, he happened on a judo club, long before the judo craze became fashionable in the Western world. With his usual thoroughness, Feldenkrais mastered the art and became a Black Belt holder. But this was not enough. He began to teach judo; as there was no textbook, he proceeded to write one and it has become the standard work in the field; it is now in its 60th edition.

While teaching some friends how to make proper use of their bodies, Feldenkrais got his first empirical notions on what was later to develop into a healing system. In several instances, people remarked that various aches, pains and chronic disorders had disappeared after they took up his exercises. These were individuals in fairly good health, who had gotten rid of minor disabilities such as repeated headaches or back pains. But Feldenkrais began to wonder whether he could not help people who were actually suffering from severe cases of arthritis, lumbago and similar ills.

At first little more than a hobby, his explorations involved him in an intensive study of anatomy and physiology and soon came into conflict with his work as a physicist. Eventually he had to make a decision: either to continue as a laboratory scientist, with the hope that his mathematical gifts and adventurous curiosity might one day lead him to useful discoveries, or to drop this potential career and concentrate on personal healing.

His enormous interest in people, and perhaps his idealistic zeal from early *chalutz* days, turned him to healing. Over the years, Feldenkrais developed a system, based on relaxation of psychic tension combined with a regained physical control, that has helped hundreds of people for whom standard medical procedures had failed. He has restored outstanding personalities to active and useful lives, with Ben-Gurion as the prime example. Almost anyone in Israel can name others.

Feldenkrais usually begins by studying the neck muscles at the base of the skull. It is here that the "knot" may harden, with pressure on nerves affecting almost any part of the body. Indeed, every physiology textbook shows that the neck muscles affect reflexes all through the body. "This is routine knowledge for all medical students," Feldenkrais points out. "Yet, like so many things we know, little use is made of it. No one seems to have put this

particular knowledge into practice the way I do."

Feldenkrais seems to have an uncanny perception, amounting to divination, for putting his finger on the "trouble spot." He will observe the way of walking, the head carriage of a new client, and usually be able to name the disorder on sight.

Because Feldenkrais has a strong personality, it is often said that he uses hypnotism. And because one of his treatments includes a slow pressure of his hands on the sufferer's head, in order to begin to free the tensed-up neck muscles, there are even people who say he practices the "laying on of hands." (Conversely, his results suggest that mystic healers who used the laying on of hands in the past may inadvertently have released pressure at the base of the skull.) There is nothing esoteric about his method, Feldenkrais insists, and he has trained some of his assistants in its use. His greatest wish is to establish a large training center. He has long had Ben-Gurion's endorsement for such a center, but funds for the foundation have not been forthcoming.

Ben-Gurion has been quite explicit about his own cure and he is hardly a personality to have been subjugated by hypnotism. Shortly after reaching the age of 60, the then-Prime Minister of Israel seemed to be spending more time inside hospitals than out, suffering from crippling attacks of lumbago. Here is how he describes his experience in *Ben-Gurion Looks Back*, a series of talks with Moshe Pearlman, which was recently published by Simon and Schuster:

"I remember that on one of my American trips I came down with a sudden bout of lumbago in New York . . . the doctors said my meetings would have to be cancelled. I had a bad time and was in considerable agony." But, due in Washington, he managed to get there. "I remember entering the White House on sticks when I went to call on President Truman."

News of his ailment was reported in the press. "One day I received a letter from an Israeli, who signed himself Moshe Feldenkrais, telling me that he could cure me. I showed the letter to doctor friends who pooh-poohed his suggestions and dismissed him as a quack. I did not reply to the letter."

Then, at the start of the Sinai campaign in 1956, he had another severe attack. "While resting, I was visited by a young friend, Professor Aharon Katzir of the Weizmann Institute. He advised me to see a friend of his, a physicist and judo expert who, though not a medical man, had some original ideas." That did it. "Feldenkrais came to see me. He watched my movements, studied my posture and then suggested exercises to correct them. He also urged me to stand on my head for a few minutes each day—the heart pump, he said, works more sluggishly as you grow older, and standing on the head gets more oxygen to the brain quickly."

Walking was also advised and Ben-Gurion—like Truman—still outdistances reporters in his brisk daily hike of never less than four miles. As for the headstand, he still uses it, though not every day, and for not longer than three minutes. "All I can say is that I began this 'treatment' 10 years ago and I have never had a recurrence of my back ailment."

Besides his restoring the Prime Minister to health, here are a few more of the fabulous results that bring people from afar to see Feldenkrais: *continued on page 66* 39

The chief lecturer in the science of statistics at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, a mathematical genius, is a spastic who until his mid-30's could barely make an understandable sound, as he was unable to control his tongue and lips. Nor could he cross a room without falling against the furniture. He was able to take only a few painful lurching steps before his muscles jerked him off balance.

Treatment with Feldenkrais was, as usual, tried only as a last resort. Feldenkrais is enormously proud of this case and being an excellent, if sometimes frightening, mimic, he will throw himself out of balance and let his tongue loll out in horrifying grimaces as he mimics the original condition of the statistics professor. Treatment was slow and protracted. But from the time when a spastic discovers that he can make a movement—even the smallest—under his own control, persistent cooperation is assured. A segment of a head-turn, made under pressure of the teacher's hands, and then tried again and again by the pupil alone—once he succeeds in that, he can progress.

After several years of treatment, the statistician is now able to control his facial muscles to the point where he can lecture normally. He has full body movement and his former disability is hard to detect as he walks to and from his classes.

More clearly psychological was the case of the chief editorial writer for one of Israel's leading newspapers. A woman in her 40's, she had led a most active life and was admired for her force of character as much as for her brilliant pen. She had been an officer in the Israeli army, she played tennis, rode and loved to ski. At one point, this woman began to feel pain in her knees and hip joints; the disorder grew progressively severe, until she could no longer mount stairs or get in and out of a car.

Medical specialists told her that her trouble was congenital. X-rays showed that her hip sockets were improperly formed and did not receive the head of the femur. Her legs were growing increasingly out of joint and the pain was unbearable. The doctors could only suggest an operation that would fuse the joints rigidly in position and relieve her of pain. But she would then be permanently on crutches.

Before consenting to the operation, she went to see Feldenkrais. After studying the X-rays, he of course agreed about her deformed hip sockets. "This is strictly a medical matter. I can do nothing about it," he told her. The woman sighed and painfully lifted herself from her chair, preparing to leave. Quietly, he asked, "Have you ever thought, how could you have led such an active life until now, with the same deformation?"

The editorial writer held onto the back of the chair, staring at him with a glint of appreciation for his acumen. The simplest evidence is often the most persistently ignored. "I cannot pretend to change your bone structure," Feldenkrais added, "but perhaps we can restore to you the former use of your body, the same body that always had this deficiency."

The lessons followed—a series of specially devised exercises. In the course of the lessons, the editorial writer—like so many other pupils—revealed the psychogenic roots of her trouble. The year before, her only daughter had been killed in an automobile accident.

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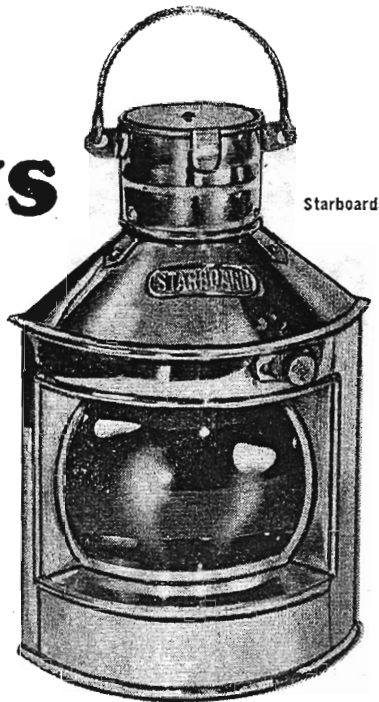
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own will to live had slackened and this had been reflected at the weakest point of her body, in the slackening of the muscles that had always held her hip joints in proper form, despite the defect in bone structure. With the loss of tonus in these muscles, her disability had begun.

This psychological understanding helped. The physical exercises now took effect. Within a year she was fully active, riding and skiing again.

Despite a series of spectacular successes, and despite referrals from the medical profession, Feldenkrais has not won the wider acceptance he dreams of for his method. He has never presumed to give it medical status, nor to attempt to help people suffering from diseases outside the range of its application, but he does feel that the knowledge he has gained could be utilized by other practitioners as well. A few years ago, on a visit to New York, he offered to demonstrate his method at Bellevue Hospital. A number of department heads were called together by the hospital director, who was himself highly impressed with Feldenkrais.

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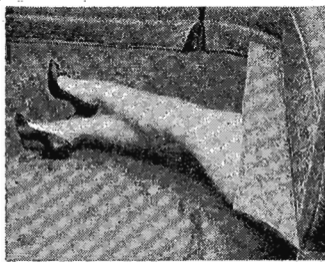
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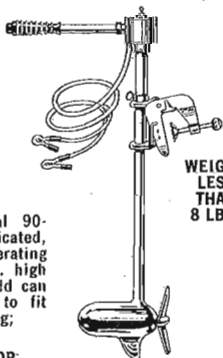
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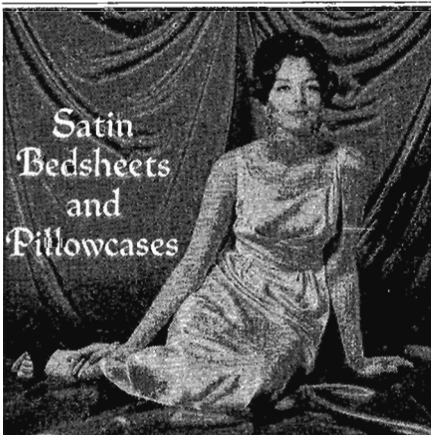
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lollled, constantly jerking in convulsive movements, and whose entire body twitched in ceaseless contortions. Feldenkrais had seen such cases before; he had even been successful with spastics, as in the case of the statistical genius. But a child, a helpless child, was a thousand times more affecting and pitiable. Feldenkrais was taken aback by the confrontation and by the challenging hostility of some of the medical men.

He asked for a moment to gather his forces and this didn't sit well with the skeptics. Finally he asked for permission to take off his coat. The frowns deepened.

Then the "quack" went to work, pressing gently on both sides of the child's head and turning the head, under control of his hands, just as though it were making a deliberate movement. As he relates it, he tried to hold the child's eyes not only to convey his great desire to help the

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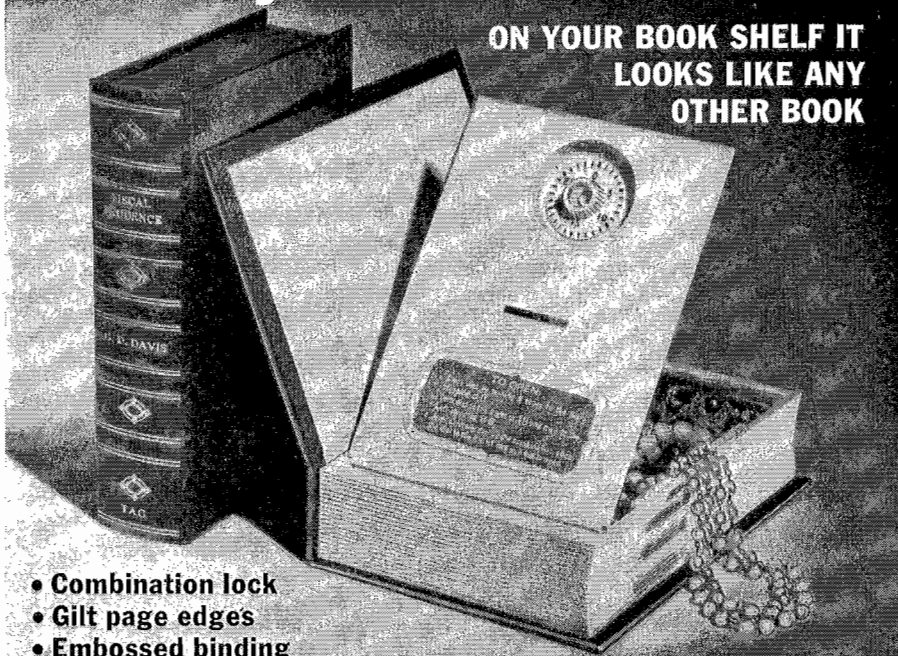
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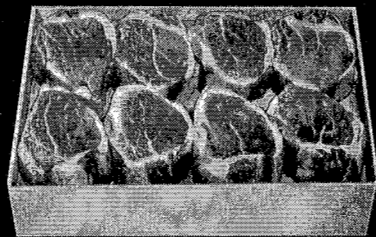
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sufferer, but also because the neck and eye muscles are intimately connected. He hoped that the child's eyes, following his, would, if even in the faintest way, evoke a sympathetic response in the neck muscles.

After the exercises had been repeated a few times, the child understood (just as other spastics had understood) that a force from within himself could do what the hands were doing—could control the movement of his head. The child began to make efforts to move his head, under the now-diminished direction of the hands. Finally, at the end of only one session, Feldenkrais lifted his hands away and the child made a completely voluntary controlled movement—the first great step forward was accomplished!

For several weeks, Feldenkrais continued to give demonstrations at Bellevue. A number of the department chiefs, among them the head of the physical therapy department, were eager to assign individuals to study his method. But the chief of neurology concluded that Feldenkrais possessed a "masterful personal quality" that could not be taught to others, and shortly thereafter Feldenkrais took his method home with him.

Anyone who wants to benefit from that method must go to Israel. While giving private sessions to extreme cases, Feldenkrais conducts a number of therapeutic classes for minor sufferers. He has 18 groups with 50 members in each, thus dealing with more than 900 persons during the course of a month.

The classes may include visitors from abroad who have completed their private sessions and have progressed to group exercises. Next to a member of a kibbutz sent to Feldenkrais for treatment of his ailing leg, there may be a couturier from Paris with asthma; a Russian-Egyptian-Israeli sound engineer subject to severe headaches; and an American novelist (not this one) suffering from an aching back.

Feldenkrais has expounded his method at various international conferences on physiotherapy and his papers have been published in scientific journals. "But don't call me doctor," he says laughingly. "I don't treat patients. I just give lessons."

For such pain-alleviating "lessons," tormented, ailing and aching pupils come to Feldenkrais from the four corners of the world. ©