

Living at the heart of a “Promised Land”

Written by Dr. Michael Berenbaum

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Ari Shavit, *My Promised Land: The Triumph and Tragedy of Israel* (New York: Spiegel and Grau, 2013) pp. 449).

The anguish of the believer is not the same as that of the renegade, and Ari Shavit writes as a believer in the Zionist enterprise. Not Zionism in the mystical sense that sweeps away all reality and overlooks all issues and problems, but as a man loves his wife of many years, fully aware of her virtues, fully mindful of her flaws and fully embracing the love that is at the core of their relationship. He writes of Israel as “we,” not “they.” He hears in the many discordant Israeli voices that often rage at one another voices that make the society thrive.

Ari Shavit’s new book, “My Promised Land: The Triumph and Tragedy of Israel,” is a tour de force. Written in lyrical prose by a distinguished journalist who listens attentively when he interviews, Shavit engages his subjects and also the land of Israel. He is the great-grandson of Herbert Bentwich, a religious English Jew who came to survey Palestine in 1897 to evaluate its potential as a national home for the Jewish people and then returned to create a familial home, a national home. Shavit does not write of others, but of his own nation, his promised land.

The book’s thesis is simple; Zionism has succeeded beyond anyone’s wildest dreams, it has produced a vibrant, vital, innovative, creative imaginative, prosperous, diverse society that is throbbing with life, and yet its successes have come at a tragic cost and Zionism’s future, even after 65 years of Israeli independence, is uncertain -- the neighborhood is dangerous in new and perplexing ways. How Israel has managed to resolve its myriad problems in the past is no guarantor of future success.

Zionism has achieved so much, and yet not its stated mission, which is to end Jewish vulnerability, to solve the problem of anti-Semitism, to normalize the Jewish condition. It might not have even achieved independence, as Israel lives in a globalizing world that is increasingly interdependent.

A word on Shavit’s methodology: He has neither written a history of Israel nor a chronicle of its wars and woes, although those can be found in the book. Instead, he has chosen 16 epochs in Israeli life, beginning with the arrival of his great grandfather in 1897, to portray the struggles of each generation. Four deal with the first 50 years of the Zionist enterprise, the birth of the Zionists’ movement and Zionism’s vision “for a people without a land, a land without a people.” He understands what his great grandfather saw and what he did not see -- could not see. He takes his readers into the swamps as they were being drained, into the kibbutz as it was being formed, into the settlement of the land and its cultivation in the orange groves of Rehovot. He explores the creation of the Masada myth and the oath: “Masada shall not fall again.”

Shavit does not give his readers a history of the War of Independence, but chronicles in one chapter the struggle for Lydda 1948, which was first published in the *New Yorker*. From there, he grapples with the absorption of immigrants and the great project of Dimona, which sought to

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give Israel the security, the normalcy for which it so longed. He is careful not to arouse the censors' ire, and tells his readers only the details that have been published in the West. He avoids dealing directly with the epic wars of 1967 and 1973, and with the ill-fated invasion of Lebanon in 1982, but rather with its aftermath of settlement, occupation and peace, and then focuses on contemporary challenges.

In each chapter, Shavit interviews key historical figures. An unidentified engineer describes his role and the role of his colleagues in creating Israel's nuclear umbrella; Aryeh Deri tells his story of the rise of the Ultra-Orthodox Shas Party, Yossi Sarid and Yossi Beilin and Amos Oz are interviewed about the peace process. Shavit listens attentively, asks the most poignant of questions, researches comprehensively and reflects deeply. He comes to listen and to probe; he leaves to consider and to absorb, to reflect and to write. He goes to Israel's bars and discothèques to explore their hedonistic, individualistic culture; he meets with Israeli entrepreneurs and bankers and with those fighting for social justice against the unrestrained free market forces that have magnified class distinctions and shattered the social justice contract of Israel. He meets with farmers and industrialists, generals and intelligence chieftains.

And he meets with Israeli Arabs to hear their story, to learn of their tragedy.

He sees the paradoxes of contemporary Israel and is willing to confront them: In Shavit's writing, the commonplace divide between hawk and dove seems shallow. Right and Left are seen as mirror images of one another. Simple formulas: “If only we annexed [or withdrew] from the territories, there would be peace.” Mutual recriminations: “Our dead have died because of their illusions of greater Israel [or that peace was possible].” Jewish extremism and Muslim fanaticism have fed one another, nourished one another and played into the hands of the other. They may even be allied with one another, seeking a confrontation that will result in the other's demise. Grappling with the 1967 war -- a war that is still being waged -- will not protect the achievements of 1948, because that war, too, is also ongoing.

Shavit avoids simple characterization: He sees the occupation in all its horror, the expulsion of 1948 in all its indignity, yet he is under no illusions that peace is readily achievable, even with withdrawal even as he understands its urgency all too well. He believes that Iran is an existential threat to Israel and to the Jewish people. And while he cannot accept Benjamin Netanyahu's sense of himself as the Winston Churchill of 2013, he believes that the Prime Minister understands the threat, even as he may be contributing to it by not acting more robustly on the Palestinian front and further isolating Israel. Shavit understands that the threats of disintegrating states and non-state actors are very different from the armies that attacked, or threatened to attack Israel, in the past. We cannot fight the past wars to win the next.

Shavit is hard on Israel's political leadership, a leadership unequal to its task, unworthy of the nation's past. The more I read Shavit, the more I recalled a remark someone made 30 years ago that sadly still rings true: “Only a confirmed anti-Semite would believe that Israel has the political leadership it deserves.”

One can quarrel with Shavit. Was the tragedy of Israel from the inception of the Zionist movement, from Herbert Bentwich, or from his successors?

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One can quibble with some of the details of this work. There is no evidence that President Franklin Delano Roosevelt refused to bomb Auschwitz, no matter how many times and to how many prestigious forums the Prime Minister of Israel reiterates the charge; there is direct, documentary evidence that David Ben-Gurion and the Jewish Agency Cabinet he chaired refused to request that Auschwitz be bombed on June 11, 1944, during the height of the deportation of Hungarian Jews, because they did not know enough of what was happening on the ground in Auschwitz. They still thought it was a labor camp. Israel must grapple with its own history before it charges betrayal by the West.

Yet “My Promised Land” is a work without peer. No single work depicts the complexity, vitality and achievements of Israel society as well. And no other work also depicts Israel’s failings and its challenges so poignantly, so lovingly and so soberly.

Like many Israelis, Shavit has staked his own life and the life on his children on this uncertain outcome. Such is the believer’s faith. His last words are “come what may.” They sound eerily akin to the Biblical Israelites’ response at Sinai, “na’aseh v’nishma,” “we will do and hear.”

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