


Is Zionism never having to say you're sorry?



MY PROMISED LAND

"My Promised Land: The Triumph and Tragedy of Israel," by Ari Shavit

Spiegel & Grau, 464 pages, \$28

From the short biography on the website of London's Hampstead Synagogue, one might infer that Herbert Bentwich was a singular fellow. He helped found the shul in 1892, and served as its warden for two years. Piqued when he was not re-elected, he thereafter attended services sitting apart from the congregation in his own pew, before leaving the synagogue altogether. In later years, he retired to his country seat in Kent, conveniently equipped with its own synagogue.

This online sketch is far from a complete biography of Herbert Bentwich (1856-1932), lawyer and proud Zionist. Certainly, there is no mention of this episode in "[My Promised Land](#)," his great-grandson's new book. But the book connects to Bentwich in other ways: In 1897, he toured the Jewish settlements and holy sites in Ottoman-era Palestine, to scope how viable the ancestral homeland was for the seeds of a new idea called Zionism.

[Ari Shavit](#) uses that trip as the anchor of his book, in an attempt to contextualize the history of Zionism. But there is something of the anecdote about Bentwich and the pew that pervades his descendant's book, which is a deeply personal contemplation of how Israel came to be, and where the future is likely to take it.

Shavit is well placed for the job: As a longtime reporter and columnist at Haaretz and a talking head on Israel's Channel 1, Shavit could best be described as a skeptical liberal – someone whose mature appreciation of the irrefutability of civil rights is tempered by his apprehension of threats from within and beyond. Shavit was not the first or only liberal to become increasingly dubious about the prospects for peace in Israel in the troubled period following the Oslo Accords of 1993. But he is the most eloquent and individualistic of these critics, someone who often manages to infuriate left and right alike with his counter-intuitive political commentary.

Shavit traverses time and territory to establish the legitimacy of [Zionism](#). “My Promised Land” is both reminder and rebuke, an argument for the necessity of Zionism, and a reminder that – in Shavit's estimation, at least – the battle is not yet won. It is also his contribution to the struggle for Israel's soul, but to grasp this, one must understand what he is fighting for, and why.

Shavit sets out his stall forcefully from the very first line: “For as long as I can remember, I remember fear. Existential fear.” The year of Shavit's birth, 1957, was the year after the Sinai Campaign, and a decade and a bit after the end of World War II, the Holocaust. No surprise that Shavit grew up feeling bound, emotionally and intellectually, to the experiences that drove his ancestors to Palestine half a century before his birth.

But what about Herbert Bentwich? The attractions of Zionism and migration may seem a little remote to a prosperous Englishman. But the appurtenances of prosperity mask the 19th-century equivalent of Shavit's existential fear: “In Russia, [Jews] are persecuted; in Poland, they are discriminated against,” he writes. “In Islamic countries, they are a ‘protected people’ living as second-class citizens. Even in the United States, France, and Britain, emancipation is merely a legality ... Many find it difficult to address Jews as free, proud and equal.”

This is a convincing enough argument for Zionism in itself, but there was something else troubling Bentwich: the very survival of the Jewish people. This had once been guaranteed by two exclusionary mechanisms: God and ghetto. But these bonds were dissolving; between annihilation and assimilation, Shavit avers, the continued existence of the Jewish people was at risk from without and within.

Zionism would have presented a solution to both external and internal threats. Try to imagine the Palestine that would have greeted Bentwich. “Looking out over the vacant territory of 1897, Bentwich sees the quiet, the empty, the promise...,” Shavit proposes. But there was a problem, of course: Palestine was not empty.

As it happens, another member of Bentwich’s touring party was the writer Israel Zangwill. Today, Zangwill would probably be considered a realist in the Kissinger mold. Then, he saw the Palestinians, and was clear about what was to be done. “Zangwill will conclude that because others occupy the Land of Israel, the sons of Israel should be ready to take tough action: ‘To drive out by sword the tribes in possession,’” Shavit quotes – if not in approval then at least with understanding. Better to be honest than a hypocrite.

First, however, there was the matter of settling the land. “My Promised Land” is at its most compelling when Shavit charts the history of the early Zionist endeavors and the struggle against the land.

Kibbutz Ein Harod did not exist when Bentwich passed by in 1897, en route to Mount Tabor. By 1921, however, its pioneers were a “well-organized, disciplined socialist structure,” and Shavit tries to give us a sense of their motivation: “Having lost one civilization, they had to construct another. Having lost their homeland, they had to invent another. That is why they came to Palestine, and why they now cling to the land with such desperate determination.”

Through sheer grit and determination, the writer tells us, the pioneers rescued the mosquito-ridden marshland of 1897 and turned it into something with promise, something new.

'Cheap labor force'

But even as the Zionist utopia begins to take root, outstanding issues remained. Rehovot, Ari Shavit's hometown, was enjoying the prosperity of commerce in the 1930s, for instance. "After the barren land was purchased and the Bedouins occupying it were evicted, it was taken over by Russian and Polish Jews, hoping to find peace and plenty in the land of Israel." Shortly afterward, Shavit observes: "Rehovot embraced free-market principles, thrived on private enterprise, and had a cheap and efficient labor force provided by neighboring Arab villages."

The fear doctrine begins to wobble here. It is easy to accept that Jewish migration to Israel was necessary. It still doesn't make the lopsided relationship between Palestinian and Jew, such as Shavit describes it, acceptable. This matters, because in the undercurrent of resentment displayed by the Palestinians as early as the 1930s, one can sense the first intimations of what would become Palestinian nationalism. The analysis of this situation in "My Promised Land," however, is uncomfortably reductive: "The brutal events that took place between April and August 1936 pushed Zionism from a state of utopian bliss to a state of dystopian conflict," Shavit writes about the start of the Arab Revolt of 1936-39.

It wasn't inevitable though, and the time-line underplays the role that confident, assertive – perhaps even arrogant? – Zionism played in the birth of Palestinian nationalism.

The Zionist movement was, after all, exclusionary: for Jews alone. We shouldn't make too much of this, though. This approach was not just a mirror of its age, but also – as Shavit reminds us, repeatedly – the consequence of existential fear.

This does not, however, excuse the Zionists for their contributory culpability for what had passed and what was to follow. But Shavit, I think, believes it possible to have it both ways. In the wake of the widespread violence of the Arab Revolt, it became acceptable to discuss Zangwill's bleak prognosis of 1897, and the possibility of population transfer.

One must be fair. “My Promised Land” does capture accurately the threat that nascent Palestinian nationalism posed to the yet-to-be-born Jewish state. But the book does elide the not-exactly-trifling matter of responsibility for this state of affairs. Zionism, it seems, means never having to say that you are sorry.

‘Lydda is our black box’

What Shavit promises at the start is a contextualization of Zionism; what he delivers, quite possibly without realizing it, is the notion of a nation distilled in fear, and one that has become accustomed to responding accordingly. It is helpful to remember this view as one continues, as it offers revealing insight into the evolution of mainstream Zionist thinking.

Lydda, 1948. The War of Independence. “Lydda is our black box,” Shavit writes. All wars are ugly, of course. Even so, what he recounts here is deeply discomfiting. It takes courage to write about these things candidly. It isn’t just the expulsions, the pointless and senseless murders, but the matter-of-fact ambience of the moment. Even so, Shavit is deliberately provocative, trying to force the reader into making peace with the brutalities of war.

When he evokes the “distinctive, highly dangerous Arab-Palestinian identity,” he is stating the problem. The solution? “There was a need for a different sort of action. War was inhuman, but it allowed one to do what one could not do in peace; it could solve problems that were unsolvable in peace,” Shavit avers. Which is to say, either us or them. The writer has a way with facts that undercuts the benign fantasy of bloodless territorial transfer.

He describes an PIAT anti-tank shell fired into a mosque from 6 meters, killing 70; soldiers spraying the wounded with automatic fire, walking into nearby houses and gunning down anyone they saw. Under the circumstances, arguing over whether the surviving Arab population of Lydda left of its own volition or was expelled seems farcical. This is the “different sort of action” that Shavit infers was necessary.

In case we don’t get the point, he drives it home: “[I] know that if it wasn’t for them,

the State of Israel would not have been born. If it wasn't for them, I would not have been born. They did the dirty, filthy work that enables my people, myself, my daughter, and my sons to live." In the context of that time and those circumstances, Shavit may be brutally correct; but being correct is not always the same as being right. Zionism must learn to say sorry sometimes.

One of the reasons – perhaps the only worthwhile one, other than entertainment value – that we study history is to learn from the mistakes of the past and not repeat them. "My Promised Land" is a book about the complicated, tangled and occasionally troubled history of Zionism, but it doesn't allow itself to take the lessons of the past and transpose them onto the future.

Take, for example, Ofra in 1975, and the birth of the modern settlement movement. Shavit is quick to distinguish [settlement](#) on the West Bank and in the Gaza Strip from the pre-state pioneer movement: "Ofra is no Ein Harod. It did not issue from a desperate diaspora but from a sovereign state. It did not stand up to a foreign power but against the Jewish democratic state."

True. But the settlement movement claims to drink from the same well as the pioneer movement did half a century earlier. And herein lies the argument – one that is not addressed in the book – that the settler movement is repeating the mistakes of the past, principally because the Zionist leadership of Israel did not learn from them. Support for a Greater Israel is not the most obvious extension of Zionist thinking, but neither is it the most illogical. To address the latter, one must resolve the former.

It might be that there is another cause for this cognitive dissonance. Although it is never explicitly stated in "My Promised Land," there is a sense of another kind of fear: that owning up to the mistakes of the past will mean surrendering all that has been gained. If this is correct, then the fear is that the cycle of territorial chauvinism and blow-back is doomed to be repeated, ad nauseam.

Republic of Fears

Intentionally or not, "My Promised Land" does articulate a very important estimation

of what Zionism has created. Today's Israel is something akin to a Republic of Fears. Iran. The Palestinians. Infiltrators. The European Union. Obama. Utopia – if it ever really did exist – has become dystopia, and the last third of Shavit's book, a status update on the current standing of Zionism, must be read in this context. The staunch resistance that Shavit puts up to the forces of change – the unquantifiable forces of change, to be fair – lend him the airs of a hide-bound conservative. There is nothing wrong per se in tilting toward the past, but it must be recognized for what it is. Shavit's promised land was shaped by the discipline, the determination, the art, the culture of European Jews. And, above all that, by their fear.

We see something of this instinctual resistance in the chapter about [Aryeh Deri](#), once the great hope of the marginalized non-Ashkenazi majority of Israel. This is "My Promised Land" at its best – and at its worst: It captures the essence of the Mizrahi revolution and the rise of Shas in exquisitely lucid detail. But suddenly, illumination is snuffed out.

"[Deri] is quick and sensitive and his high IQ is matched by his inflated ego," writes the author. "There are sparks of genius in him. I like him. And yet, Deri lives in a faraway place. He has other commitments and loyalties. He is a citizen of a world I don't know." Anything that falls outside the parameters of classic Zionist thinking – the discontent of the Mizrahi [of Middle Eastern or North African origin], for instance – is a threat to the ongoing task of nation-building. A moment of comprehension is lost.

The remainder of the book runs in a similar vein. The Oslo Accords, the wave of hedonism at the turn of the century, the simmering discontent of the Arab minority, even the [standard-of-living protests](#) of 2011 – Shavit refracts them all through the limited prism of historical Zionism.

Then there are the things that aren't mentioned at all, like Zionism's relationship with the wider world and the growth of Israel's migrant, non-Jewish population.

There is also the matter of tone and style. "My Promised Land" favors the sweeping declarative statement, literary flourishes that fill the book with a sense of urgency, but

sometimes strike the wrong note. When Shavit remarks, apropos a little ethnic needling, that the British were still illiterate barbarians while the Hebrews were writing the Bible, one can laugh it off as misjudged posturing. But elsewhere, Shavit writes with absolute certainty where circumspection might have been more convincing. It's the difference between trying to win the argument and trying to win friends: The former might give immediate satisfaction, but achieving the latter is more useful in the long term.

For all this, "My Promised Land" is an important, indeed essential book for anyone genuinely interested in understanding how the ambitious emancipation movement of a persecuted minority became insular and ethnocentric. There are things to be afraid of, but this is not the Israel of 1897, or 1947. All things considered, one can say that Zionism succeeded, against the odds. (A chapter about Dimona and Israel's alleged nuclear "insurance policy" concedes this point.)

Israel is not, despite Shavit's protestations to the contrary, a country that needs to be afraid. Rather, it continues to behave a bit like Herbert Bentwich: withdrawing to one's pew, to one's synagogue, alone, because it is the only option that one can recognize.

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