

Emmanuel Navon on Israel's 3,000-Year Diplomatic Heritage

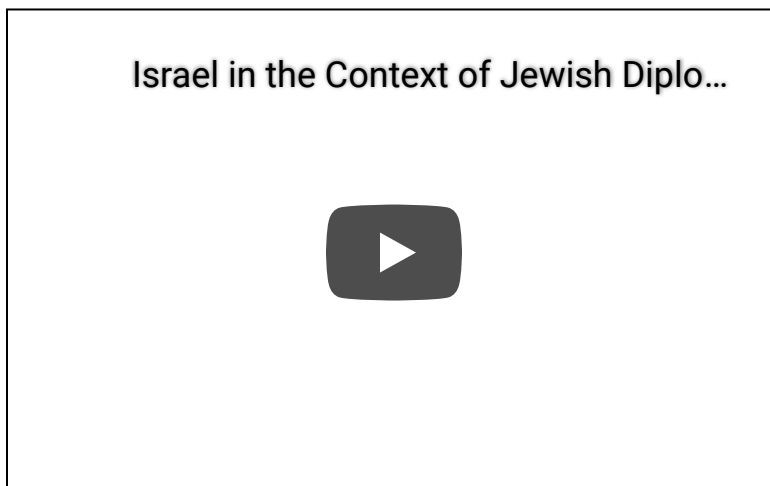
by Marilyn Stern

[Middle East Forum Webinar](#)

January 8, 2021

<https://www.meforum.org/61922/navon-on-israels-3000-year-diplomatic-heritage>

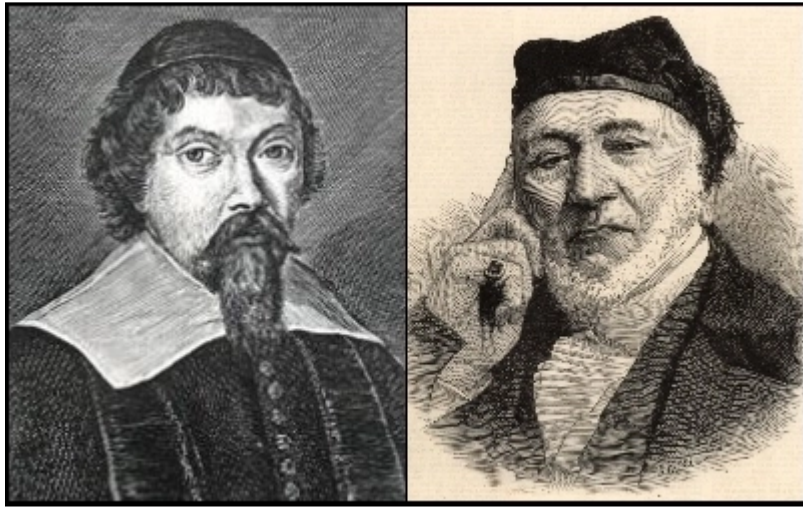
Emmanuel Navon, political scientist, author, and foreign policy expert, spoke to participants in a November 23 Middle East Forum webinar ([video](#)) about his new book, [*The Star and the Scepter: A Diplomatic History of Israel*](#), which traces the diplomatic history of the people of Israel from ancient times until today.



Navon's central thesis is that the Jews' diplomatic relations with outsiders over the centuries have been most successful when striking a balance between their "spiritual heritage," symbolized by the star, and "political power," symbolized by the scepter, metaphors inspired by a biblical verse from the Pentateuch's Book of Numbers.

Navon discussed numerous historical cases, beginning with the successful Jewish rebellion establishing the Hasmonean monarchy against the Greeks and Bar Kochba's failed rebellion against the Roman empire (the latter was "disastrous" for failing to take account of political realities), and extending to the Diaspora and modern times.

Jewish notables who succeeded in using diplomacy to protect their people from the scourge of Jew-hatred include Menashe ben Israel, a



Menashe ben Israel (left) and Sir Moses Montefiore (right) used diplomacy to protect the rights and safety of Jews.

Dutch-Portuguese scholar who successfully negotiated with Oliver Cromwell in the 17th Century to win the readmission of Jews to England after more than three centuries, and Sir Moses Montefiore, who helped persuade Ottoman Sultan Abdulmecid I to protect Jews from the blood libel in the wake of the 1840 Damascus Affair.

In the late 1800s, the Zionist political movement blossomed under the leadership of statesmen-diplomats such as Theodore Herzl and Chaim Weizmann. Here, the "age-old tension" between "faithfulness to the past and adaptability to reality" surfaced again. The first test of "realpolitik versus principles and ideology" came with the British government's proposal in 1903 to establish a Jewish state in Uganda, which was withdrawn after being "hotly debated" by the Zionist Congress.

The second test, according to Navon, arose in 1937 amid heightened conflict between Jews and Arabs in the British Palestine Mandate. David Ben-Gurion, leader of the Jewish community and later the first prime minister of the State of Israel, faced the Peel Commission's proposal to partition the mandate. Despite the fact that the Jewish allotment would make for "a very small state with unworkable borders," Ben-Gurion, with "cold political realism," saw the necessity for the Jewish people to obtain "some kind of sovereignty" in the face of the Nazi menace in Europe and restricted immigration.

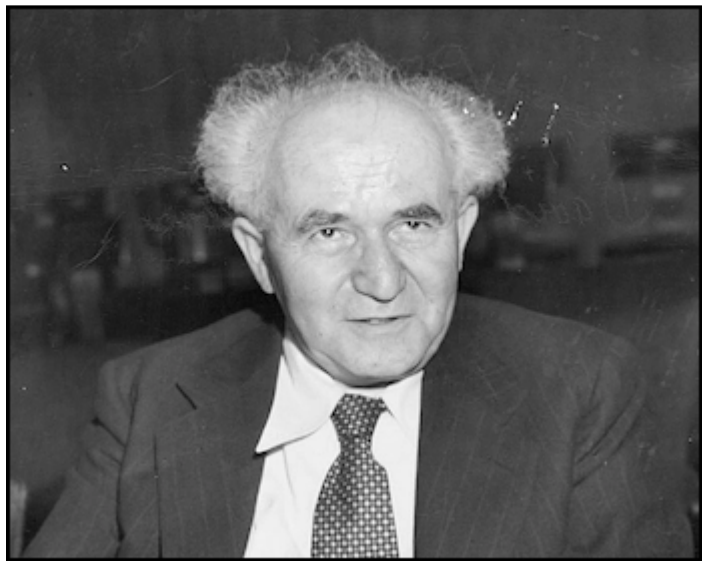
The 1947 U.N. partition plan accepted by Ben-Gurion was also "far from perfect," particularly in light of the decimation of a third of the Jewish people in the Holocaust. Zionist critics at the time faulted Ben-Gurion for accepting Jewish statehood on less than the entire

British mandate, as had been urged at the Zionist Congress held at New York's prestigious Biltmore Hotel in 1941. When reminded of the Biltmore resolution, Ben-Gurion testily replied, "Biltmore, shmiltmore ... we need a state now!"

Israel's Declaration of Independence in 1948 "has a clear commitment to Jewish history ... the ingathering of the exiles," Navon said, but Ben-Gurion, prescient about the "dilemma

surrounding the partition plan," intentionally removed the question of borders from the final draft, taking great care in wording the document. The partition plan was not a binding resolution, but rather a recommendation of the U.N. General Assembly that "became moot the moment it was rejected by the Arab League." Ben-Gurion knew that the borders of Israel would be decided in the war against the Arab world that was sure to follow. The 1949 armistice line ultimately afforded Israel more territory than the original U.N. proposal. Navon sees Israel's "secret to success" in 1948 as remaining faithful to Jewish history but accepting the real-world necessity to adapt to reality and "be ready to fight for it."

In closing, Navon attributed the current improvement in the Jewish state's international status to its "long-term implementation" of the "iron wall" strategy proposed by Ze'ev Jabotinsky in a 1923 essay. Jabotinsky, a Zionist activist, orator, writer, and soldier who founded the Jewish Legion during World War I, asserted that the Zionist movement's strategy and foreign policy should be based upon establishing deterrents and a strong will to fight. Proving to the Arabs that Israel not only "cannot be removed or destroyed" but can even offer protection from Iran's hegemonic and nuclear ambitions is what enabled the normalization process underway today. The Gulf states also see that oil is an unsustainable economic model, making Israel's leadership in technological innovation a big attraction.



David Ben-Gurion accepted a "far from perfect" UN partition plan.

The "ultimate lesson" of Israel's long and complex diplomatic history, Navon said in conclusion, is to maintain a "balance between faith and power, or between the star and the scepter."

Marilyn Stern is communications coordinator at the Middle East Forum.