

An exploration of Israel's diplomatic history

By Brandon Marlon

"DIPLOMACY INVOLVES compromise between ideals and realpolitik, between principles and interests," according to *The Star and the Scepter* author and international relations expert Emmanuel Navon (*From Israel with Hope*), a lecturer at Tel Aviv University and IDC Herzliya, whose new work aims to fill a lacuna in the existing literature on Israeli foreign policy by giving a systematic and updated account thereof that is additionally informed by the lengthy diplomatic history of the Jewish people.

In its attempt to adumbrate Israel's relations with the nations across time and space, the work evidences admirable ambition and posits a winning idea. As a history, *The Star and the Scepter* delivers a matter-of-fact account of Jewry's international relations; it concerns itself with praxis, not theory (and therefore a theoretical treatise remains a major desideratum). In this current effort, Navon employs a wide lens to retrace the interactions between Jewish politics and neighboring countries and empires, and between individual Jewish statesmen and gentile rulers during Jewry's nearly bimillenary statelessness, a unique phenomenon in the annals of world history. He limns Israel's precarious balancing act between faith and power, or idealism and pragmatism, binaries symbolized by the star and the scepter respectively, and ascribes Jewry's survival "to a strong sense of historical mission, as well as to the constant adaptation of that mission to the real world."

Notably, Navon's treatment of biblical and classical Israel – periods spanning more than 2,000 years – comprises approximately 50 pages, just one-tenth of the book, the majority of which consists of recapitulation with concise conclusions, more summary than analysis. By contrast, Navon's survey of the State of Israel's foreign affairs is comprehensive and methodical, his analysis perspicuous. The distinct impression given the reader is that this book would have been best published in two volumes or at least with two equal sections, one covering antiquity and the other

modernity, each afforded equal attention and thorough analysis.

Overall, the book is an impressive and accessible narrative accenting the expediciencies and exigencies of realpolitik; national interests, regional allegiances, and international alliances; solidarities and betrayals; voting blocs; alignments and realignments; severed relations and rapprochements. The author foregrounds numerous important geopolitical matters, including the cynical nonabrogation of the anomalous UN agency UNRWA in spite of the establishment of the all-encompassing UNHCR agency the following year; the Bandung Conference (1955) in Indonesia, from which Israel was excluded at the last minute; Israel's erstwhile "periphery strategy" to forge ties with non-Arab and anti-Soviet states in the Middle East; the influence of communist North Korea on Arafat and the PLO; Israel's subsequent "arms sales diplomacy"; modern Israel's ill-fated retrocessions (land-for-terrorism) made under pressure; Hezbollah's infiltration of and illicit activities in the relatively lawless Tri-Border Area of South America; Africa's "Islamic Arc" (Mali-Nigeria-Somalia); the Visegrád Group, an eastern European political alliance between Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia, whose pro-Israel posture challenges conventional EU policies on the Middle East; and the game-changing impacts of military prowess, advanced technologies, and natural resources. The author's depiction of modern Israel's European relations is particularly adept.

Navon's perspicacious estimations are only seldom marred by solecisms, as in the case of Queen Salome Alexandra (Shlomtzion HaMalkah), regrettably given short shrift and portrayed as unsuccessful – despite the fact that she possessed extensive foreign connections, was respected by neighboring monarchs, was praised for her peaceful reign by the Pharisees, and diplomatically (by means of peace treaties and gifts) prevented

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the advancing King Tigranes II the Great of Armenia from occupying Judea (circa 70 BCE), or in the infelicitous assertion that the State of Israel's large natural gas deposits have "helped mend fences with Turkey", a plausible potentiality thus far unrealized.

Given the brisk pace of current events – including Israel's newly normalized relations with the UAE, Bahrain, Sudan, Morocco, and Bhutan (with perhaps Saudi Arabia or Oman also on the horizon) – the book will doubtless require an updated edition.

The Star and the Scepter should be required reading for every veteran and cadet in Israel's Foreign Ministry, and will be of significant interest to informed and educated general readers concerned with the Jewish people's and the Jewish state's places in the world. The book includes 18 maps, endnotes, a bibliography, and an index. ■