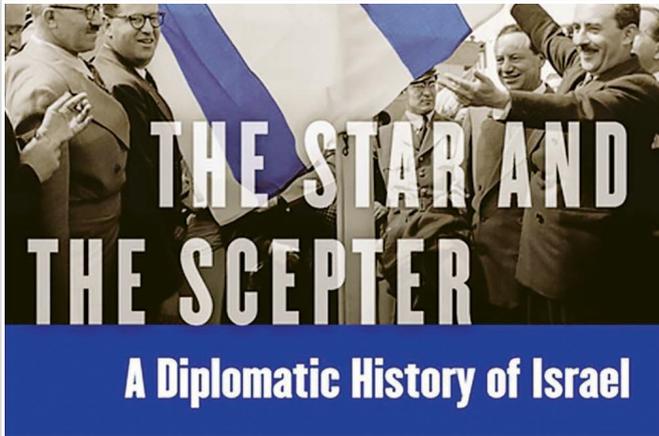


The Star and the Scepter: How Israel gained political clout



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By **AARON HOWARD** | JHV • **Thu, May 06, 2021**

Most scholars trace the beginning of modern diplomacy to The Peace of Westphalia in 1648. That's where diplomatic representatives from 96 entities ended the Thirty Years War. The participants aimed to create a new world order in central Europe. They articulated a model for international politics based on the concepts of international diplomacy, mediation among nations and diplomacy state sovereignty.

In contrast, Emmanuel Navon traces Israeli diplomatic history back to the Hebrew Bible. Navon's take on the diplomatic history of Israel is based on the model that modern Israel has a specific purpose; that is, a historical mission as a nation. "Drawing lessons from this exceptional history is prerequisite to guaranteeing Israel's future," writes Navon in "The Star and the Scepter" (Jewish Publication Society).

Navon was born and raised in France where he studied public administration and interned at the French Foreign Ministry. He then made aliyah and obtained a Ph.D. in international relations from Hebrew University. He teaches, lectures and serves in various think tanks. Politically, he ran for the Knesset on the Likud ticket. He espouses a Realpolitik approach that includes Israeli rapprochement with Europe's populist governments (like Hungary and Poland).

In "The Star and the Scepter," Navon argues that one cannot understand Israel's interaction with the world without a basic knowledge of Tanach. Core concepts, such as "a nation that dwells alone" and "a return to Zion" are Bible based. During the long Jewish exile, the embrace of the extremes of messianism and assimilation led to dead ends, writes Navon.

The idea of restoring Jewish sovereignty by way of human action basically was secular. Theodore Herzl believed the promise of emancipation in Europe was a sham. Herzl had no illusions about how deeply antisemitism was rooted in Germany. However, he was shaken by the level of antisemitism in France that he experienced while covering the Dreyfus trial. He established the modern Zionist

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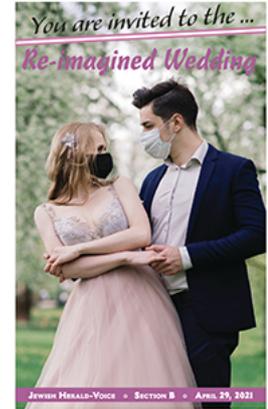
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movement, precisely because the promises of the Enlightenment no longer could be trusted. His answer was to turn the dream of return to Zion into a reality since he reckoned there was no future for the Jews in Europe.

World War I reshaped the international geopolitical system. Britain replaced the Ottoman Empire as the major power in the former sanjaks of Jerusalem and Beirut. Although the British Balfour Declaration encouraged the Zionist project, it hardly can be said that Britain was an ally of Zionism or of Jewish immigration to Palestine.

In two chapters, Navon covers Zionist diplomacy in the British Mandate period. He argues that Zionist leaders learned how to strike compromises between their aspirations and constraints on the ground, between realism and ideology. From the perspective of modern Arab diplomatic history, one is struck a recurring pattern of Arab failure to strike compromises. From Egypt's Gamal Nasser to all Palestinian leaders, Arab leaders rarely have sought a pragmatic approach to their future. Therefore, they continue to get it wrong in their relations with Israel.

Near the book's close, Navon addresses the geopolitics of energy. He recounts how OPEC used oil blackmail to isolate Israel politically after the Yom Kippur War. First, the OPEC embargo led to a policy designed to reduce American dependence on Middle East oil. Today, only 7% of U.S. oil needs comes from Middle East countries. This has reduced the importance of the Middle East in American political calculations. Second, the discovery of huge natural gas reserves in the Eastern Mediterranean has transformed Israel into a natural gas exporter. This also has transformed Israeli diplomatic relations with Turkey, Greece, Cyprus, Jordan, Egypt and Italy. Navon sketches some of the possible outcomes of Israel's changed energy situation.

The book was completed before Israel's peace agreement with the Arab Emirates; that topic is not covered. Recently, the UAE signed a memorandum of understanding with Israel to buy a 22% interest in Israel's offshore Tamar natural gas field for \$1.1 billion. It's too early to tell how energy geopolitics will play out. Will it lead to closer relations between Israel and the Arab world or will ideological politics trump business? If you're a fan of the Realpolitik approach to politics, you believe in practical and realistic considerations over ideological notions. History provides compelling evidence for both approaches.

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