



The star and the scepter: a diplomatic history of Israel

by Emmanuel Navon, Philadelphia, The Jewish Publication Society, 2020, xix +508 pp., \$36.95 (hardback), ISBN 978-0-8276-1506-9

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BOOK REVIEW

The star and the scepter: a diplomatic history of Israel, by Emmanuel Navon, Philadelphia, The Jewish Publication Society, 2020, xix+508 pp., \$36.95 (hardback), ISBN 978-0-8276-1506-9

Amongst the many challenges of writing about Israeli foreign policy, there are two that stand out. First, do the Jews have a tradition of foreign relations, or is the 'Jewish people' a mid-19th-century invention by Jewish historians? Second, does the Jewish foreign policy tradition contain both particularistic values and universal ideals advanced by biblical prophets and/or Talmudic scholars? Emmanuel Navon attempts to deliver a comprehensive answer to both challenges.

The author, a respected scholar of Israeli foreign policy, starts his analysis by examining the Jewish narrative contained in the Book of Genesis, in which Abraham is ordered to leave his native land for a new destination, where the patriarch is promised that his descendants will become a nation. The author ends his analysis many centuries later, with Israel's astonishing emergence as a player in the geopolitics of energy. Abraham's movements from Mesopotamia to the Land of Canaan and, thereafter, to Egypt and back are not coincidental. 'The acts of the fathers are omens to their sons', according to Jewish convention; and, indeed, throughout Jewish history, moving back and forth between the Land of Israel and the diaspora is a recurrent theme. The struggles between brothers, assertiveness versus submissiveness, a contractual relationship between God and His people, as well as between Israel and its land, are also ideas that have accompanied the Jewish people for millennia, as Navon makes clear as well.

The author's book provides the reader with a panoramic view of the history of Jewish foreign policy in light of two main themes: faith and power. During the Jewish journey from antiquity to modernity, Navon detects ideas related to Realpolitik in the Hebrew Bible, as well as in the experience of the restored State of Israel. He probes alliance politics and military strategies, as well as the United Nations saga and relations with the Palestinians. The geopolitical map that he covers includes relations with African and Latin American states, along with ties to Asian nations. Predictably, the Western orientation of the Jewish state is dealt with in greater detail, especially in comparison to his emphasis on the Soviet Union/Russia. And, finally, Navon plunges into the ties between Israel and the Jewish Diaspora.


It is on this last topic that this reviewer would like to remark in some depth, particularly because of the definition of Israel as a Jewish state. This reviewer has in the past highlighted the issue thusly: 'Is there a specifically Jewish foreign policy?' Significantly, Navon introduces the reader to the underlying ideological tension between the Zionist movement and American Jewry from the inception of the return to Zion. This tension, which has reappeared in recent years, has

largely been overlooked since the heady days following the Six Day War. Missing in Navon's account, on the other hand, are the frequent clashes between the concrete interests of Israel and those of various Jewish communities around the globe. Since the birth of the Jewish state, the country's leadership has often encountered problems in this regard, including the Soviet Jewish preference to migrate to the West rather than to Israel during the 1970s and the state-to-state relations between Israel and Apartheid South Africa during the 1960s and 1970s in view of the South African government's pressure on the local Jewish community, to cite just two instances. Navon, to be sure, touches on the Jewish dimension in his wide-ranging look at Israel's relations with countries round the world; however, these clashes of interest would have been better addressed in the chapter devoted to the Jewish Diaspora.

Navon, as indicated above, also speaks of universal values. From the Israeli perspective, the tension in this regard has been between the universalistic strand in Jewish tradition, which sees Israel's destiny as being 'a light unto the nations', on the one hand, and the particularistic strand in this tradition, which sees Israel's destiny as 'a nation that dwells alone', on the other hand. Navon captures this tension by invoking the words of the Gentile prophet Balaam: 'a star rises from Jacob, a scepter comes from Israel'. The constant existential threat to the Jewish state from day one has tilted the balance in favour of the particularistic in regard to Israeli foreign policy. And, rightly so, according to the author, who contends that the universal role of the Jews advanced by such philosophers as Herman Cohen and Franz Rosenzweig was rendered meaningless by the Holocaust. Still, he concludes that 'without a scepter, the star is in danger of extinction; without a star, the scepter is purposeless' (412).

Navon, as also indicated above, recounts more than simply the story of Israeli diplomacy. He covers Jewish foreign policy actions during the long centuries of exile. The diplomatic activities of Don Isaac Abarbanel, Menashe Ben-Israel, Sir Moses Montefiore and Adolphe Crémieux, he observes, illustrate that influential Jews were able to advance their communities' interests during the centuries of statelessness. The diplomatic history of the Jewish state, in other words, does not start with Theodor Herzl.

Navon's book, in sum, provides a sweeping portrayal of an ancient nation's diplomacy – a diplomacy that should be more carefully studied in universities, both in Israel and abroad. This reviewer looks forward to the Hebrew edition of the book. Awareness of the Jewish foreign policy tradition is not as widespread as one would expect in a Jewish state.

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