

Clues in Ancient History

This book looks for clues to understand modern Israel in conditions that have returned from its ancient history.

Israel is in the same place, with many of the same problems that troubled the ancient country of the Jews. The population is small and poor. There are chronic concerns to preserve the security of the country amidst hostile neighbors. Most of the world's Jews live outside of the Promised Land. Israel-centered Jews have not succeeded in producing a mass migration from wealthy countries, or in halting a steady movement of Jews from Israel. The great powers of the world meddle in Israel's affairs, sometimes with an intention to help but usually with a primary concern for their own interests. Domestic tensions exist between Jews and non-Jews, as well as between Jews with an affinity to non-Jewish cultures and Jews who are zealously religious or nationalistic.

Israel's style of political dispute recalls the biblical prophets. Individuals criticize, in the sharpest of terms, citizens and officials who depart from what the critics see as the appropriate path of history and threaten national catastrophe if their proposals are not accepted.

These traits show themselves in Israel's problems. The Arab uprising that began in December 1987 highlights chronic tensions in a multicultural society. It also reflects an indecisiveness in the Jewish sector, where sharply variant perspectives and a shrill style of dispute highlight fateful issues and their moral ambiguities. The near-equal division in the 1988 elections parallels the fail-

ure of the Israeli government to pursue a clear policy for the territories occupied in 1967.

The Argument in Brief

The conditions at the center of the following chapters are:

- A. The place. Not only is the geographical place of modern Israel largely identical with that of its historic antecedent, but much of what else that is parallel between modern and ancient Israel is linked, either directly or indirectly, to the common place.
- B. Israel's location has been important to the great-powers of the ancient and modern worlds.
- C. Israel has been weaker than great powers that have taken an interest in its affairs. Israel has had to seek "windows in history" in order to assert its own autonomy.
- D. Due to the vulnerability of the place, there has always been a diverse population. In both ancient and modern times, this has led to conflicts between Jews and non-Jews.
- E. The porous nature of Israel's territory has facilitated migrations outward as well as inward. In both ancient and modern times, there have been substantial diasporas of overseas Jews. Migrations and diasporas have presented both political opportunities and problems to the Jewish homeland.
- F. The attractions of cosmopolitan cultures for Jews, including those living in the homeland, have led to tensions and outright conflict between cos-

mopolitan and zealous Jews both in ancient and modern times.

- G. A prophetic tradition of severe criticism directed at the population and the authorities developed prior to the construction of the First Temple, and became one of ancient Israel's great legacies. The tradition is firmly established in the political culture of modern Israel. A prophetic style of policy advocacy features an explicit concern for Jewish history and the lessons to be learned from it for the present generation, the unrestrained criticism of established practices, and a warning of dire consequences if the criticism is not heeded.

Also similar in ancient and modern periods are the relations between these various conditions. Jews concerned with the purity of their own culture and religious practices have not contributed to the flexibility of Jewish politicians who somehow must find a path among the contending demands of different Jewish constituencies, and the demands of hostile non-Jews and neighboring governments. Domestic politics have been complicated further by the pressures exerted by great powers, as well as by the carping of policy critics who sound like biblical prophets.

Some Words of Caution

Perhaps it is intellectual *chutzpah* to look in ancient history for some clues about the character of modern Israel. The ancient period spread over one thousand three hundred years and is separated from the modern period by one thousand eight hundred years.¹ Over those long spans, political thought and practice changed among the Jews, as well as among their neighbors in the Middle East and among the great powers of the world.

Differences Between Ancient and Modern Israel

In focusing on what is similar between ancient and modern times, this book is not oblivious to some important differences. It is appropriate to state some limitations of the argument at the outset. Some of what is distinctive about modern Israel, as well as its similarities with the ancient country, is important in shaping the way the modern country makes policy.

Modern Israel is a democracy with an elected government rather than a monarchy or theocracy ruled by a high priest. Political change has been orderly in modern Israel, without the killings that marked the ruling families of biblical Israel. The vast majority of the modern population is urban, rather than rural. Most wage earners are involved in the provision of services or industrial activity. Agriculture is the work of a small minority and is done mostly by collective settlements (*kibbutzim* and *moshavim*) rather than by individual peasants. For education, health care, and income security, the modern Israeli family looks to a sophisticated and strong state, rather than to itself.

Modern Israel has been stronger militarily than its immediate neighbors. The great powers of today are not Israel's neighbors. This difference provides modern Israel with more room for maneuver in international politics than its predecessor.

Military technology available to modern Israel is vastly different from that of ancient times. Modern Israel has used sophisticated weapons to compensate for its disadvantages in population size and economic wealth. Yet, what Israel has its enemies can acquire and learn to use. The day might come when Israelis wish that the available weaponry would revert to the cumbersome tools of old that could only kill one person at a time.

Modern technology facilitates communication between Israel, the diaspora, and friendly governments, and allows the rapid mobilization of whatever help might be forthcoming. Of course, the internationalization of

politics and economics does not only help the Jews. The enemies of Israel also have friends throughout the world, as well as economic resources and political appeals that they use to cement their own alliances.

Attitudes and political behaviors differ from those of ancient times. The Jewish people have seen two millenia of miserable history. The first generations of modern Israeli leaders are trying a new strategy of assertive dependence on their own capacity to find a way amidst their difficulties. Jewish civil wars, false messiahs, statelessness, and the Holocaust might lessen the hope for heavenly intervention in Israel's behalf and lessen the tendency of Jews to elevate the temperature of policy debates by claiming to speak in God's name.

Variations Within the Ancient Period

Another problem for historical comparison spread over such a long timespan is that the Jewish country changed during its ancient period. Israel was initially a tribal society. Then it was a monarchy, which alternated between periods of stability and turmoil. Later, there was theocratic rule by high priests, and then another period of monarchy. Foreign conquest occurred several times. On some of these occasions, the conqueror was content to take over tax collection and the management of the Jews' foreign relations. On other occasions, the conqueror's wrath was unrestrained. Jewish civilians were slaughtered or taken as slaves. On occasion there were mass exiles of the Jews, while foreign populations were brought in to farm the land, occupy the cities, pray to their own gods, and marry with the Jews who remained.

Some Minefields in Jewish History

It is appropriate to approach the linkages between history and contemporary events with some awe. Karl R. Popper wrote a book about historical reasoning in the shadow of World War II. He dedicated it:

In memory of the countless men and women of all creeds or nations or races who fell victims to the fascist and communist belief in Inexorable Laws of Historical Destiny.²

There are special dangers in dealing with Jewish history. The long span of the people's records, and their existence in so many countries and conditions presents the danger of misreading the importance of individual events or documents.

The Jewish nation has intense enemies, who have shown themselves capable of justifying bestiality by selective readings of Jewish history. What some enemies of the Jews have not found to support their theories in the historical record, they have invented. Contemporary Jews have experienced virulent historiography firsthand. There is still some life in the lie that Jews kill Gentile children in order to use their blood in the production of *matzoh*. The Russian invention, *Protocols of the Meetings of the Learned Elders of Zion*, is seen in Arab countries as proof of Jewish conspiracies.

Historical distortion also appears among the Jews. Some claim that the Land of Israel is theirs by virtue of God's gift and historical realities. Such assertions must be taken into account as a factor in Israel's politics, even if they do not by themselves determine the outcomes of important decisions. The Bible reveals that the boundaries varied from one period to another and included non-Jews. The Land never was the exclusive domain of the Jews.

Other Jews find lessons of political moderation in their history. A failed rebellion against the Romans led by Bar Kokhba is used by one Israeli to support a recommendation that his country accepts the United States' recommendations about Israeli withdrawal from the occupied territories.³ An American Jew sees political acumen, rather than military force as a source of Jewish survival over the centuries. He, too, urges compromise rather than domination as the wisest course for modern policymakers.⁴

As will become evident, the reading of Jewish history offered in this book is not one that clearly supports prescriptions of territorial domination or political moderation. There are many themes in this people's history of some three thousand five hundred years. The Bible includes figures who were aggressive and those who were accommodating. At times the people seemed to succeed through military action, and at other times by accepting the dictates of great powers. A politician or professor can justify widely different courses of action by a reading of the ancient sources.

The message that this author finds most clearly in Jewish history is the continuity of certain problems. Rarely, if ever were the Jews dominant in their region. Almost always, greater powers could determine their fate. The Land promised to them was never entirely theirs. The Jews themselves were usually divided. A theme that returns time and again is the conflict between those who were cosmopolitan in assimilating features of the dominant culture and those who were militantly Jewish.

Jewish survival and prosperity seems to have depended on a leader's skill in coping, or finding a path between these sources of tension. The task was not made easier by the Jewish habit of severe self-criticism. The prophets were perfectionists who claimed to be speaking for God when they chastised the people and their rulers for misbehavior.

It is possible to find an importance in history without exaggerating its weight or venerating it above other values. Historical inquiry can contribute to the reasonable treatment of current issues by pointing out patterns of long standing that might work against certain aspirations.⁵

Skepticism is appropriate in the historical perspective. One historian has collected a list of epigrams that summarize the questions that have troubled many of his colleagues, and the contrary answers that have been offered.⁶

When one is too curious about the practices of past centuries, one ordinarily remains very ignorant of the practices of this one. (Descartes)

The dignity of an historical epoch depends not upon what proceeds therefrom, but is contained in its very existence . . . each epoch has its own dignity in itself.
(Ranke)

Men make their own history, but they do not know that they are making it.
(Marx)

The justification of all historical study must ultimately be that it enhances our self-consciousness, enables us to see ourselves in perspective, and helps us toward that greater freedom which comes from self-knowledge.
(Keith Thomas)

This book seeks to find a path between several time-worn cautions. History does not repeat itself, exactly, in the unfolding of major events. New things do occur under the sun, despite the often-quoted phrase from the Book of Ecclesiastes.⁷ There is no intention here to portray historical patterns that determine the courses taken by contemporary Israelis. There is no description of historical cycles or stages.

There is no assertion that historical conditions force the decisions of policymakers or that Israel is unique in being affected by historical conditions of long standing. Officials of many countries are constrained by elements that began long ago, even while they decide for themselves about social services, economics, and foreign policy.

Israel's recorded history is unusually long, and its people are led by their religion and their culture to contemplate crucial events from their distant and recent past. Israel's history might affect its present more than is the case for other countries, but that trait is neither demonstrated nor implied in these pages. The Jews have experienced many things and have expressed a great variety of sentiments about themselves and their surroundings. Traces of many such events and utterances can be found in the present generation of Israelis.⁸ There, however, the traces of these events must compete among themselves,

as well as with the continued infusion of new stimuli to an active and vibrant country. If the present generation of policymakers is influenced by its many pasts, those policymakers also exercise their discretion in deciding what to do.

The discussion of returning historical parallels relies on the characteristics of the place occupied by both ancient and modern Israel. While geography plays a role in this book, there is no assertion that geographic traits have determined the policy choices made by ancient or modern officials.⁹

God deserves mention in these pages, insofar as His name appears frequently in the writings and speech of ancient and modern Israel. However, there is no intention of depicting His hand as being responsible for the unfolding of Jewish history.¹⁰ Nothing to be described here is meant to indicate that modern Israelis are without the freedom to choose their policies. Judaism is not fatalistic. The Bible indicates time and again that God provides much leeway to His people.

This book offers its findings from a perspective that is secular and explicitly pragmatic. It does not claim to be making a true interpretation of historical events wrapped in religious controversies. Indeed, it is not useful to look too closely at the details of ancient history. Many of the events that are described in old and venerable sources do not stand up to the skepticism of modern scholars. For this reason, it would be unwise to rely on the detailed biblical reports of political events to guide modern officials.

This book is more a wide-ranging essay than a systematic review of either the ancient or modern periods. It relies on a reading of others' work, as well as ancient sources, to identify conditions that seem to persist from one period to another.

Later chapters discuss several solutions that have been mentioned for Israel's problems, without claiming that any of them emerge clearly from Israel's history as an option that must be chosen or must be avoided. The pur-

pose is not so much solving Israel's problems as describing parallels between ancient and modern Israel that seem to frustrate solutions for the modern country's problems.

The focus is on *general patterns more* than historical *details*. A number of similarities in the conditions of ancient and modern Israel seem relevant for the current generation. Numerous observers agree about these conditions that persisted from one ancient period to another, even while they argue about the accuracy of many details that appear in ancient sources.

The Periods at Issue

For our purposes, the period of ancient Israel begins with the appearance of Israelites in the Promised Land. In the history as presented in the Bible, the Israelites arrived under the leadership of Joshua, after the death of Moses. That may have occurred about 1200 B.C.E. The ancient period ends with the failure of the Bar Kokhba Rebellion against the Romans in 135 C.E.

Some readers might prefer other beginning and ending points for ancient Israel. It is possible to begin with Moses. His style of leadership and political organization, prior to the Israelites' arrival in the Promised Land, has attracted the attention of other political scientists.¹¹ Yet the post-Exodus settlement in the Land is an attractive time to start, insofar as it begins the confluence of Jewish settlement with the place that has proved so important for the historic parallels.

It might be preferable to compare modern Israel with the period of the Second Temple (from 537 B.C.E. until the Temple's destruction during the revolt of 66–73 C.E.),¹² leaving out the period of the initial settlement and the First Temple. This later beginning would simplify the comparison. The period of the Second Temple was more clearly affected by competition between groups that could be

called political parties. Concerns for political demands of the great powers were more pervasive and better documented. Israel of the Second Temple was also more thoroughly involved with Jewish diasporas abroad. By beginning with the initial settlement and including the First Temple, however, it is possible to include the eras that gave birth to the prophetic traditions in Israel's culture. With the earlier beginning, it is also possible to show that a concern for the great powers and relations with non-Jews living in the Land marked the longer span of Israel's history.

Some readers may object to ending Israel's ancient period with the repression of the Bar Kokhba Rebellion. The Romans did not put an end to Jewish settlement in Palestine. The rebellion occurred principally in the region around Jerusalem. The Romans wreaked their havoc there and left the Jews of other regions to continue with their lives and their studies.¹³ However, the end of a substantial Jewish presence in the Land had begun. It is estimated that the Jewish population in the country declined from 1.3 million before the rebellion to seven to eight hundred thousand afterwards.¹⁴ The Jews were denied their political center in Jerusalem. Jewish politics remained active elsewhere in Palestine for a long while, with ups and downs in the peoples' standing with the Romans and their hopes for the future. One historian concludes that Jewish political history in Palestine ended only in 614 C.E., when Persian invaders went back on their promise to reestablish Jerusalem as the center of a Jewish country. By then the Jewish population had declined to the range of one hundred fifty to two hundred thousand, or 10–15 percent of the population. There were not enough Jews to assume the ruling status that their leaders desired.¹⁵ Israel in its ancient homeland did not become a Jewish country or dominate world Jewry until the events set in motion by World War II.

What about the missing 1,813 years between 135 and 1948? There were Jewish golden ages in Babylon, Arabia, Spain, North Africa, Europe, and North America. At vari-

ous times there were important centers in the Promised Land itself: in Sefad, Tiberias, and Jerusalem. The events of those times and places left their mark on contemporary Judaism and Jewish culture, the attitudes of Jews and Gentiles to one another, and the behavior of the Israeli government.

For our purposes, this middle part of Jewish history is secondary. The long years of dependence could have taught Jews a great deal about coping with hostile political conditions, while being concerned with national survival. Jewish politicians were active during this period, but they were more dependent on others than prior to Bar Kokhba or after 1948.¹⁶ Jewish politicians of the intermediate period did not have their own government in the Middle East, and they did not have to deal with the conditions to be described here as having characterized ancient and modern Jewish history.

How Should Israeli Policymakers React to this Book?

There is no clear answer to this question. Modern conditions that are parallel to those of ancient times show no signs of weakening. At least for the time being, they seem likely to operate as parameters that set the outer boundaries of what policymakers can achieve.

Perhaps only an intellectual exercise is presented herein to determine the similarities and differences in two widely separated periods of Jewish history. Major changes are possible in the conditions to be described. The great powers might lose interest in the Middle East; Jews of different perspectives might learn to accept one another without rancor. Jews and Arabs might find ways to accommodate one another peacefully in the same or neighboring jurisdictions.

Miracles have been seen before in the Holy Land. The spiritual environment prepares some people to expect a

messiah to set things right. A few modern Israelis have seen signs of the messiah's imminent arrival. Jewish security forces acted against one group that saw God's work in the military victory of 1967 and sought to facilitate the new age by removing Moslem holy sites from the Temple Mount.

The resemblance of modern Israel's problems to those of the distant past may suggest action on the part of the country's leaders, lest an unpleasant bit of history repeat itself again. Or the historical parallels may only mean that certain steps are to be avoided as likely to be unproductive.

The skill—and the fate—of Israeli politicians might be to avoid grand illusions of meeting fully any of the demands of foreign or domestic protagonists. Their situation recommends the limited aspiration of "coping" or "satisficing." This means solutions that are "good enough" but not optimal.¹⁷ Satisficing implies juggling a shifting mix of partial and temporary solutions to chronic problems. Israelis may be stuck in a situation that demands perennial coping with temporary and superficial policies. Their solutions are likely to be inelegant and to invite harsh criticism from home and abroad.

This message is not entirely pessimistic. Other countries as well as Israel must cope with problems of long standing, although few may claim problems with a heritage of three thousand two hundred years. Good politicians are expected to make insoluble issues tolerable. Jews may be better than other people at coping with unpleasant conditions. They have maintained a distinctive culture, longer than most other peoples, despite strong hostility. Their ancient country maintained itself, more or less, despite several major destructions, over a span of some one thousand three hundred years. Modern Jews have put Israel on the map again and have maintained it as a lively democracy in an era when most new countries have gone the way of domestic repression and *coup d'état*.

The successes of the Jewish country in its biblical site

reflect both the weight of history and the importance of contemporary leaders. Israel's dynamism represents the power of modern leaders to build a new society from an ancient people. Tensions among Jews, and between Jews and Arabs represent a heritage that is old and contentious. Yet, the peace treaty with Egypt and accommodations with Jordan represent positive changes in detail that coexist alongside of continued tensions. Policymakers can find additional room for maneuver despite historical conditions that could set outer limits on what they may achieve.