

A Must-Read Book for Brokers of Mideast Peace Talks

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By **Peter Berkowitz** - October 27, 2013



Last July, after numerous trips to the Middle East during his first weeks as secretary of state, John Kerry earnestly announced the renewal of peace talks between Israel and the Palestinian Authority. In the ensuing months, Kerry has been reminded that good intentions, certainly in that part of world, are never enough.

Although the parties have met more than a dozen times since midsummer, they have exchanged acrimonious words in public while the talks seem to have been pushed to the sidelines of American diplomacy by Syria's use of chemical weapons and by the opening of direct negotiations with Iran over its nuclear program. In addition, Israel's own internal contradictions have complicated the task, and I sometimes wonder whether Kerry and other well-meaning Americans have fully factored into their expectations the complexities of Israel's domestic politics.

Progressive critics of Israel in the United States and Europe contend that lack of progress in the latest round of American-sponsored peace talks has little to do with regional events. They were doomed from the outset, these critics are convinced, because of Israel's continued building in the West Bank, and stubborn Israeli opposition to a withdrawal to the Green Line, Israel's pre-1967 borders.

Conservative supporters of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's government will agree that this round of talks, like the many before it, are doomed, but not because of anything Israel has done beyond the Green Line. They maintain that the root problem is the Palestinian Authority's refusal to recognize Israel as the nation state of the Jewish people. This negation is part and parcel of persistent PA incitement of hatred of Israel through PA-run schools, PA-controlled media, and statements by PA political officials including PA President Mahmoud Abbas.

Underlying these clashing views on the obstacles to peace is a shared shortsightedness. The typical critic of the Netanyahu government, like the typical supporter, fails to see in Israel's hold on the West Bank any hard political choices, puzzling moral dilemmas, or elusive religious ambiguities.

The same is often true of left-wing and right-wing Israelis. The left tends to regard Israel's continuing control over the West Bank as nothing but an unjust occupation that is the antithesis of the Zionist dream of Jews creating in Israel a nation like all other nations. Meanwhile, the right views Israeli settlement of the biblical Judea and Samaria as nothing less than the fulfillment of the Zionist dream of redeeming the Jewish people by making the ancestral homeland bloom and prosper.

It is tempting to say that both sides can't be correct. It would certainly make Middle East politics easier if there were one true and just Zionism.

But there are multiple Zionisms—or multiple dimensions of Zionism—with deep roots in Jewish tradition and the historical experience of the Jewish people. American diplomacy that ignores the tensions and divisions within Israel may enjoy short-term achievements but it will not produce stable, long-lasting results.

One is not likely to find a surer guide to the Zionisms that compete within Israel's soul than Yossi Klein Halevi's new book, "Like Dreamers: The Story of the Israeli Paratroopers Who Reunited Jerusalem and Divided a Nation." A senior fellow at the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem and a contributing editor of *The New Republic*, Halevi brings to "Like Dreamers" the gifts of a seasoned political journalist, master storyteller, and supple theologian. Taking on topics where rancor is the norm and empathy in short supply, he explores the hopes and fears of Israelis across the political and religious spectrum and writes about them with grace and insight.

Halevi grew up in Brooklyn and was drawn as boy to Israel by its dazzling victory in June 1967 in the Six-Day War. In May, Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser moved Egyptian troops across the Sinai Peninsula toward Israel's border; shut the Straits of Tiran, blocking Israel's southern shipping route; expelled the U.N. buffer force from Sinai; and broadcast across the region its intention to destroy the Jewish state. To defend itself, Israel launched a preemptive air strike that destroyed the Egyptian air force on the ground. In six days, Israel

routed the Egyptians in the Gaza Strip and the Sinai Peninsula, seized control of the Golan Heights from Syria, and drove Jordanian forces back to the East Bank of the Jordan River. The Six-Day War seemed to make all dreams in Israel possible.

But when he immigrated to Israel in 1982 at age 29, Halevi found a country in which the national consensus about Zionism had unraveled, where utopian dreams clashed with utopian dreams. For 30 years, he has chronicled the “vehement schism between left and right” in Israel. In this book, he exposes the “utopian fantasists” of both the secular left and the religious right while showing how “each camp had expressed something essential about Jewish aspirations.”

“Like Dreamers” tells the story of the struggle between the “conflicting certainties” that arose in Israel after 1967 by relating the stories of seven men of the redoubtable 55th Paratroopers Reserve Brigade. They liberated Jerusalem during the Six-Day War and led the daring nighttime crossing of the Suez Canal in October 1973, which helped avert a military catastrophe for Israel after Egypt and Syria’s surprise attack.

Four of the paratroopers featured in Halevi’s book were sons of the secular kibbutz movement, which represented Israel’s great experiment in collective living in agriculture communities. One became a leading conceptual artist who built a greenhouse on his kibbutz “to teach young people ecological principles and kibbutz values. He also helped found the progressive peace movement in Israel and eventually broke with it because of his skepticism about the Palestinian readiness to make peace.”

Another helped jump-start Israel’s transition from a state-run economy to a free-market economy.

A third was sent to prison for 12 years for visiting Damascus to develop an underground movement that would work toward the creation of a single state between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea.

And one became Israel’s leading poet-singer, a gentle and free-spirited bohemian, who fashioned for himself a highly unorthodox version of observant Judaism.

Three of the paratroopers Halevi profiles were religious Zionists; they believed that the rise of a free and democratic Jewish state in the land of Israel played a vital role in the religious redemption of the Jewish people. One founded Kfar Etzion, the first post-Six-Day War settlement, on the very spot where, in May 1948, Jordanian soldiers and local villagers burst through the perimeter of the original Kfar Etzion and executed the besieged kibbutz’s final eight defenders, who were waving the white flag of surrender. He went on to become a member of Knesset.

One became the settlement movement's "great heretic," condemning the turn to violence and fanaticism among the settlers, including religious teachings that could be seen as justifying the 1995 assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin.

And one of the religious Zionists founded the Yesha Council, which represents the interests of all Israelis living in the West Bank, and became one of the settlement movement's leading activists and publicists.

Halevi follows this remarkable assortment of reserve paratroopers through the turbulence of post-Six-Day War Israel: the national trauma of the Yom Kippur War; the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982 aimed at driving out the PLO (the last war for Halevi's paratroopers); the shock of the First Intifada in 1987; the high hopes and bitter disappointments of the 1993 Oslo agreements, including the rise in the mid-1990s of Palestinian suicide bombing attacks on Israeli civilians; the rejection at Camp David in July 2000 by Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat of Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak's far-reaching proposal for the creation of a Palestinian state; and Arafat's decision in September 2000, instead of putting forward a counterproposal, to launch the Second Intifada.

Halevi's book ends in 2004, which marks the defeat of the Second Intifada and the emergence in Israel of a broad center committed to a two-state solution but skeptical that the Palestinians were prepared to build a state willing to live in peace with a Jewish state.

The great theme Halevi so adroitly explores—how Israelis can honor their political principles without deteriorating into political zealotry and how they can passionately pursue their political dreams in a country where others passionately pursue different political dreams—is one U.S. diplomats must take into account. To effectively promote a secure and lasting Middle East peace, Secretary Kerry and his team must understand the spirit of those from whom they seek painful concessions. They should start, if they haven't already, by reading this book.

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