

Israel's Vitality and Vulnerability

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It's rare enough these days for an American to write a thoughtful book about U.S. politics that transcends partisan vituperation and casts light on political complexities. It is even rarer for an Israeli to pull that off when writing about Israel.

But in a feat that should be applauded, Ari Shavit has done just that.

For all of the bad blood, the issues that divide Americans do not involve near-term threats to our very existence. Despite the bombast surrounding health care policy, immigration, and taxes, these issues do not endanger America's survival--at least not anytime soon. Even the deadly attacks of Sept. 11 did not leave Americans worried that our country would disappear.

In Israel, by contrast, threats to the survival of the nation have been a constant feature of life since the country declared independence in May 1948. In its first 19 years, Israel fought two wars--the War of Independence and the June 1967 Six-Day War--in which the avowed aim of the surrounding Arab countries was to destroy Israel.

In 1973, surprise attacks in the south by Egypt and in the north by Syria nearly overran the Israel Defense Forces before the IDF regrouped, took the battle into Egypt and Syria, and threatened to march on Cairo and Damascus. Israel is the only country on the planet whose right to exist is questioned at the United Nations and in the elite international press. And Israel confronts a foe, the Islamic Republic of Iran, that has openly called for its annihilation and which, as negotiations plod along, continues to make progress toward constructing a nuclear weapon.

With pressures so intense and stakes so high, it is little wonder that political debate in Israel sometimes resembles mixed-martial-arts caged combat.

Ari Shavit's achievement in "My Promised Land: The Triumph and Tragedy of Israel," therefore, is especially laudable. His new book weaves together autobiography, telling moments in the making and maturing of Israel--from wide-eyed and innocent 19th century Zionism to bustling, always on-the-make and always-on-the-edge contemporary Tel Aviv--and incisive reflections on the harsh paradoxes that shape Israel and Israelis.

Shavit provides a vivid portrait of the nation's astonishing birth and growth: the miracle and the misery; the tremendous economic, technological, cultural, and political accomplishments, along with the excruciating price paid by both Jews and Arabs. He gives voice to Israelis' pride in the creation of a free, democratic, and Jewish state in the Middle

East after nearly two millennia of statelessness and the hovering unease, however much rooted in security concerns, that comes from those endowed with a free, democratic, and Jewish conscience exercising political control over another people.

A former paratrooper who in his day job is a columnist for Israel's highbrow newspaper, *Haaretz*, Shavit forthrightly presents himself as a man of the left, a long-standing and passionate critic of what he regards as the catastrophe of Israel's occupation of territories seized in the Six-Day War. While conservatives will have cause to quarrel with some of his shadings, selections, judgments, and occasional tendency to the hyperbolic, Shavit emphatically does not belong to the increasingly dominant school of journalism--in the United States as well as in Israel--according to which one's political ends justify the means.

Shavit's journalistic means are exemplary. He is keen to leave his desk, immerse himself in the world, and talk to the people he writes about. He gives their voices generous room in his analysis. He highlights the moral dimension of politics without slipping into cheap moralizing or special pleading. Perhaps most impressively, he is a searing critic of his own side, laying bare the illusions and self-delusions that have increasingly marginalized the Israeli left. His book proves that passionate political engagement is compatible with journalistic integrity.

Shavit begins his epic tale with his great-grandfather, the Right Honorable Herbert Bentwich, a prosperous British Jew. Having concluded that between discrimination on the one hand and assimilation on the other, Jewish survival as Jews demanded a return to the ancient Land of Israel, Bentwich in 1897 laid the groundwork for members of his family to emigrate by leading a tour of Zionist pilgrims through what was then called Palestine.

Shavit describes the naive wonder through which Bentwich and his fellow Jewish pilgrims saw possibilities for draining swamps, cultivating deserts, and creating a moral political order--while somehow not seeing the Arab towns and villages that stood in the path of Zionism's noble aspirations. It might be argued that Shavit overstates Zionism's overlooking of the indigenous Arab population, while understating the extent to which Zionists were forced to take up arms because segments of the Arab population responded to gestures of goodwill and cooperation with violence.

But that does not diminish Shavit's ability to capture the pre-state pioneering spirit by portraying its variety.

He chronicles the founding in the 1920s of Kibbutz Ein Harod in a mosquito-infested valley in northern Israel by a group of young, fiercely determined Jews from Eastern Europe imbued with the spirit of an austere Zionist-inflected socialism. He tells of the creation of a flourishing orange grove in the 1930s on the outskirts of Rehovot by a gentleman Jewish owner and the Arab laborers with whom he worked in mutual respect.

He describes the Arab uprisings of 1936 in which attacks on Jewish civilians were supported by Arab national leaders and much of the Arab public while retaliatory attacks by Jews on Arab civilians were condemned by mainstream Zionism.

He relates the transformation in the 1940s of Masada--the mesa overlooking the Dead Sea where in A.D. 73 more than 900 Jewish men, women, and children rebelling against the Roman Empire took their own lives rather than surrender--into a site where young Jews were instilled with martial valor. And he narrates the forced exodus in July 1948, after Arab governments ignored the U.N. call for a truce, of tens of thousands of Arabs by Israeli soldiers from the strategically important town of Lydda near Israel's primary airport.

Statehood brought enormous challenges and audacious undertakings. In Israel's first 3½ years, new immigrants, most of whom had been expelled from the Arab countries in which their families had lived for generations, flowed into Israel at a staggering pace: "the number of immigrants absorbed (685,000) surpassed the number of those absorbing them (655,000), a percentage comparable to what would happen if twenty-first-century America took in 350 million immigrants in three and a half years."

In response to an unprecedented challenge for a modern nation, Israel fed, housed, educated (including the teaching of Hebrew), and incorporated into the work force and military a group of immigrants larger than its population. Shavit conveys the immigrants' dislocation and degradation as well as the new normalcy they created and the opportunities they seized.

No less astonishing was Israel's decision in 1956, before it was capable of manufacturing transistor radios, to produce a nuclear weapon. This was at a time when only the U.S., the Soviet Union, and Great Britain possessed such arms. Despite the state's continuing refusal to confirm or deny claims, knowledgeable observers believe Israel achieved its goal by the mid-1960s.

Episode by well-chosen and grippingly told episode, Shavit brings Israel of 2013 into focus. In contemporary Israel, Sephardi Jews hailing from North Africa and the Middle East, after decades of discrimination by the Ashkenazim (Jews of European descent), exercise substantial political power. Today, Tel Aviv has emerged as a premier Mediterranean beach town. The formal rights of Israel's Arab minority--approximately 20 percent of the population--are well-protected but many of their social and economic discontents are legitimate and desperately in need of government attention.

An engaged citizenry is demanding that government ease the harshness of economic privatization and deal with sclerotic remnants of the original socialist economy. The left has not adequately reckoned with the collapse of the 1993 Oslo peace accords, failing to see that its critique of Israel's occupation of the West Bank, no matter how morally sensitive, does not imply that the Palestinians are willing or able to make peace.

Religious Zionists cling to the belief that preserving and indeed increasing the Jewish presence beyond the Green Line is a strategic and religious imperative. Threats to Israel come from Iran-armed Sunni Hamas in the Gaza Strip and Iran-armed Shia Hezbollah in southern Lebanon, as well as from civil war-torn Syria and economically distressed Egypt. Looming over all is the strategic threat posed by the potential for a nuclear-armed Iran to trigger a nuclear arms race in the Middle East.

Ari Shavit discloses an Israel of amazing vitality and alarming vulnerability. And, he eloquently shows, one cannot fully understand one without the other.