Unlike Israel’s founding father, David Ben-Gurion, contemporary Israeli politicians are not prolific writers. While biographic writing is certainly on the increase, it is still in its infancy among Israeli historians. Over the past year, however, several books – autobiographies, biographies, and monographs – have been published by and about Israel’s leaders in the twenty-first century. What is the significance of this flurry of publications? Is the Israeli leadership undergoing a generational change, meaning that the time has come for summaries? Or is this another influence of American political culture? Or perhaps the leaders and biographers have an important message to present at this stage of the Zionist project?

I will attempt to answer these questions through a discussion of four prominent works – the autobiographies of Ehud Olmert and Ehud Barak, the biography of Benjamin Netanyahu, and a monograph about Shimon Peres’s efforts to bring peace. I will attempt to identify some similarities and differences between the heroes of these books, and to consider whether they can help paint a portrait of the image of the Israeli leader in the twenty-first century.

Olmert served as prime minister for less than three years (2006-2009), but the autobiography he wrote in person extends to almost one thousand pages. Despite its scope, the book has become a best-seller. Olmert, who was convicted in a corruption scandal and sentenced to 18 months in jail, was the first prime minister to spend time in prison. He was released in July 2017 and wrote his book in his cell, by hand, since he was not permitted to use a computer. The fact that his book was written in prison is apparent in almost every sentence: this is a bitter and sarcastic work, and Olmert frequently seeks to settle personal and principled scores with figures from throughout the political system, and even with his brother Yossi, a historian who amassed debts and subsequently fled to the United States.

Be this as it may, Olmert’s central claim, which is referenced throughout the book, is nothing short of astonishing:

“Rabin was murdered by revolver bullets following a terrible campaign of incitement whose end was inevitable. I live in wing 10 at Ma’asiyahu Prison. This, too, is elimination” (p. 193). The eliminators, he explains, are “the extreme right wing, the messianics, [who acted] against me with foreign funding from American Jews, and an army of pedants [in the State Attorney’s Office] who fought for its fortresses in the legal system” (p. 835). The reason for Olmert’s “elimination” was that he had been labeled as “an enemy of the State Attorney’s Office, and because I wanted to reach a peace agreement with the Palestinians. Plain and simple” (p. 66).

It is safe to assume that the miserable manner in which Olmert ended his period as prime minister influenced the paranoid tone of his description of the reasons why his career came to an end. Nevertheless, he is correct in his claim that he was willing to go the extra mile toward PA Chairman Abu Mazen in 2008 when he proposed a peace agreement. Olmert’s offer included 94 or 96 percent of the Territories, the partition of Jerusalem, the transfer of the “Holy Basin” in the city to international trusteeship, and even acceptance of the limited return of Palestinian refugees. Olmert, who came from a Revisionist Zionist background, did not refer to the great Zionist thinkers or to ideological explanations in justifying the profound change in his positions. He explains that, over the years, he came to realize that Israel has no alternative but to compromise over territory in order to preserve its character as a Jewish and democratic state.

Abu Mazen did not, of course, accept Olmert’s offer. Olmert makes littler attempt to explain his refusal, and confines himself to quoting a remark in Susan Reis’s memoirs: “Tzipi Livni urged me (and I believe Abbas) not to enshrine the Olmert proposal. ‘He has no standing in Israel.’” According to Olmert, “Livni thereby impaired Abu Mazen’s desire to move forward, perhaps, to a peace agreement” (p. 820). It is reasonable to assume that the rejection of his proposals, which were indeed raised after he was already the subject of police investigations and was losing his political strength, deserves a more serious analysis than this attempt to place the blame on Livni’s remarks. It is no coincidence, however, that Olmert looks for a personal reason to explain the rejection of his offers. His unique feature, by comparison to the other leaders, is a tendency to personal sensitivity – a quality that is evident both in the insults he hurls out and the compliments he offers. It is evident, too, in the fact that he was the only leader involved in the negotiations who emphasized the need to respect the other side and its culture (Ehud Barak, for example, proudly related in his book that he ignored Arafat at a dinner during the Camp David conference; when Clinton’s National Security Adviser Sandy Berger asked him why he preferred to chat with Chelsea Clinton rather than taking the opportunity to develop a personal rapport with Arafat, Barak replied, “Given the options, who would behave differently?” (p. 361)).

In general, Olmert is the Israeli prime minister with the most civilian agenda ever seen. When asked what legacy he would like to leave behind, he felt no need to claim, as Ben-Gurion did, that he had secured the “vision of the Prophets,” nor that he had sought to built a model society committed to Jabotinskian splendor. Instead, he replied that his dream was “a country that’s fun to live in” (p. 658).

“Fun” is part of the experience that awaits readers of a book written by Avi Gil, who served as Peres’s advisor and director of his office during his time as prime minister (1984-1986; 1996). The book – *The Peres Formula: Diary of a Confidant* – includes an interesting blend of refinement and vulgarity; of an attempt to explain Peres’s worldview and actions alongside snippets of gossip.

Thus, for example, Peres relates that his boss, who was well known for his hard-working character and his revulsion for vacations, wondered why his assistants insisted on spending valuable time with their families at the expense of work. “It’s women’s nature to keep us in a position of apology and self-justification.. Whatever you do won’t change that reality. The children don’t need their parents. Let them grow up alone and you’ll see that everything falls into place… A family is an abnormal thing.”

Anecdotes aside, however, the book presents a serious analysis of the idea most closely identified with Peres – the vision of the “New Middle East,” which he disseminated in the 1990s against the background of the Oslo process. Peres believed that even the recalcitrant and violent Middle East would be forced to adapt to progress, and that Islam would surrender in favor of secularization and the desire for a global era free of war. No culture can deny the forces of modern economics and technology, he argued, predicting that the Middle East would move forward to a twenty-first century as “a regional community of dates with a common market and elected central institutions, along the lines of the European Parliament” (p. 70). Peres found it difficult to understand that technology can also be used for reaction, and that the connection between religion, culture, and nationhood in the Middle East is complex and will not easily be dismantled. His worldview was rooted in a vision of progress according to which humanity is moving along a linear course toward a better future thanks to science and rationalism. This conviction has its roots in the Enlightenment movements of the eighteenth century and was also a hallmark of Herzl and Ben-Gurion. Today it is clear that Peres’s predictions were excessively optimistic. Even while he was working on his book *The New Middle East*, Gil showed him Samuel Huntington’s book *The Third Wave*, which examines the processes of globalization, and highlighted the passages discussing the difficulty in inculcating democratic culture in the Islamic world and the complications involved in any attempt to separate religion and state, due to cultural reasons. Peres was fascinated by technology – he was the first Israeli government minister to have a computer on his desk – but Gil soon realized that he was out of touch. Peres did not even know where the “enter” button was, yet dismissively rejected his reservations. Peres declared that the inhabitants of the Middle East do not differ genetically from the Europeans, and also noted that “within 50 years, Europe has been transformed from an arena of terrible internal wars into a continent that is uniting around the interests of economics, developments, stability, and peace” (p. 102).

Ehud Barak, who served as prime minister for the shortest period (1999-2001), was more skeptical than Peres, but nevertheless sought to reach a clear decision: peace or not. His book *My Country, My Life* is the most polished of the three. Barak responds to various events in a restrained, sophisticated, and less impulsive manner – probably the result of the fact that his ghostwriter is the British journalist Ted Namaco, who also wrote a biography of Menachem Begin.

Most of Barak’s book is devoted to describing his four decades in military service, culminating in his period as chief of staff. The most interesting sections, however, concern his period as prime minister, and later as defense minister in governments headed by Olmert and Netanyahu.

In July 2000, Barak headed the Israeli delegation to the Camp David conference, where he hoped to sign a permanent agreement with the Palestinian delegation headed by Yasser Arafat, under the mediation of President Clinton and US Administration officials. Barak set out for the conference with a plan to offer some 80 percent of the Territories for a future Palestinian state, but during the negotiations his staff agreed to transfer over 90 percent of the Territories to the Palestinians, and to divide Jerusalem as the capital of both states. Barak thus became the Israeli prime minister who went furthest toward the Palestinians. However, his offers were rejected.

Faced with this failure, Barak claimed that he had removed Arafat’s mask and exposed him as someone who refused to make peace. A few months later, in October 2000, the Second Intifada erupted, leading to the death of over one thousand Israelis. The Israeli public interpreted the Intifada as proof that the Palestinians not only did not want peace, but had chosen appalling violence instead. Since then, the left has consistently failed in Israeli elections. Meanwhile, Barak found himself condemned from both sides: the right wing argued that rather than seeking to reach a permanent agreement in a few days, he should have focused on the more modest goal of managing the conflict, thereby avoiding the Intifada. Critics on the left claimed that Barak fatally wounded the peace camp by rushing to the conference before the conditions were right. They also claimed that his insistent on placing all the blame on the Palestinians left them little alternative but to turn to violence.

These reactions explain Barak’s main effort in his book: to explain why he was not wrong to insist on going ahead with the Camp David conference. However, the further he goes into detail, the stranger his decisions appear.

Barak recalls that Clinton opposed the idea of convening a conference at Camp David unless prior and joint agreements were reached beforehand. He offered to draft a preliminary document. Arafat also opposed the conference, claiming that the gaps in the positions were too wide, and explaining to Clinton that he was afraid that Barak was trying to drag him to the conference and then “after it fails, he will blame me” (p. 349). Barak explains that he opposed to attempt to reach preliminary agreements because it was clear to him that the two sides would not be able to agree. Moreover, he claims that while he indeed hoped to reach an agreement, he was doubtful about this: “months before the conference, I instructed the heads of the defense system to prepare a plan to respond to an outbreak of violence by the Palestinians” (p. 10). What remains unclear is why, if Barak was aware of the risk that the conference would collapse, he nevertheless chose to take part, and why he failed to appreciate the connection between its failure and the outbreak of bloodshed. Barak sometimes seems to see himself more as a historian who was given a chance to undertake an experiment than a prime minster responsible for taking potential scenarios into account.

The failure of the conference and the subsequent Intifada led to Barak’s defeat at the hands of Ariel Sharon in the 2001 elections. Barak retired from politics and turned to business activities. In Israeli political culture, however, even retirement is never more than a period of waiting for a new opportunity. Barak describes his period in business by declaring: “I was reserve soldier waiting to return to the theater when needed.” In 2007, Barak was indeed reelected as chairperson of the Labor Party and was appointed defense minister under Olmert; from 2009 he served in the same position under Netanyahu. This was a fascinating period, particularly since Barak and Netanyahu worked during the period 2009 – 2012 to promote a planned Israeli action against the Iranian nuclear facilities. Only when Barak realized that the action would not go ahead did he again retire.

The tendency in Israel is to emphasize the opposition to the proposed attack among the heads of the defense establishment as the main reason why it failed to materialized. Barak’s version focuses on Israel’s dependence on the United States in such situations. He reveals that during President Bush’s visit to Israel in 2008, the president explained to Olmert and him, while smoking a cigar and drinking whisky, that “the United States is absolutely opposed to any Israeli attack” (p. 417). Barak adds that Obama continued this same position with even greater force. The fact that Israel did not dare to attack without a green light from the White House, despite the fact that Netanyahu saw the Iranian threat as an existential one, says much about the relations between Jerusalem and Washington. It also casts doubt on Olmert’s claim that he dared to bomb the Syrian reactor in 2007 without any support, even covert, from the US Administration. The impression is that when the Americans are resolutely opposed to an Israeli action, they know how to convey this message and the Israelis know how to internalize it.

The biography written by the journalist Anshel Pfeffer – *Bibi: The Turbulent Life and Times of Benjamin Netanyahu* – differs from the other books here in that it was not written by the leader himself, nor by a trusty advisor. Pfeffer attempted to be fair toward his subject, though he did not spare him criticism.

Netanyahu appears to be different to all the other leaders. It is no coincidence that he is the only one of the four who never abandoned his original party – the Likud. His worldview is the product of the Jabotinskian ideology on which he was raised (particularly in terms of Jabotinsky’s firmly nationalist stance – other more nuanced aspects of the father of Revisionism are less apparent in Netanyahu). He also differs in that he spent his youth in the United States, where he also began his political career as an Israeli representative, working as an envoy at the Israeli embassy and later as ambassador to the United Nations. Pfeffer wisely notes that Bibi’s career blossomed in the 1980s, alongside the growing importance of the neo-Conservative stream in Republican party circles.

It is interesting to note that while still a soldier, Netanyahu declared his conviction that “‘more than Israel needs America, America needs Israel as its ally against global Communism,’ and if only Israel held to its guns, it would continue to have Washington’s support and respect” (p. 86).

As a statesman, Netanyahu stressed that the United States is not only the Administration, but also the Congress and public opinion. The other prime ministers reviewed here concentrated mainly on maintaining good relations with the presidents along whom they served.

Netanyahu emerges as a skilful politician capable of making connections both with senior figures in the US Jewish community and with underprivileged sections of the population in Israel, despite the fact that his personal biography, as someone who grew up in the prestigious Rehavia neighborhood of Jerusalem as the son of a historian, is firmly elitist. Part of his bond with humbler sections of society is due to a shared sense of rejection and alienation from the elites. In Netanyahu’s case, this feeling is related to the biography of his father, Ben-Zion, who was drawn from an early age to the radical wing of the Revisionist movement and supported Israel Zangwill, an advocate of transfer (p. 28 – as a journalist rather than a historian, the author fails to note this point). Although Ben-Zion reached the position of secretary to Jabotinsky for a brief period in the 1940s and saw himself as an important figure in the movement, his attempts to join the Herut party formed by Menachem Begin after independence were unsuccessful (p. 50).

Ben-Zion reacted by claiming that Begin was a charlatan who lacked intellectual depth and was diverting the movement from Jabotinsky’s course and drawing it closer to religious and populist circles that lacked a profound understanding of politics. The irony is that, as leader of the Likud, Netanyahu based his strength on the support of Mizrahi and traditional members, as did Begin, although he is personally fairly distant from religious observance and has more than once been observed eating pork without any concern alongside religious Jews.

Netanyahu has served in his position for 12 years now – second only to Ben-Gurion. The question of his legacy remains open. He is renowned for his hawkish position on diplomatic and security issues, although in the military arena he has been forced to shelve his plan to attack Iran. Indeed, he shows a general reluctance to enter into military confrontation, and while he is not willing to relinquish territory, he has also refrained from annexing it. Interestingly, his greatest achievements to date are in the economic sphere – as finance minister, he led structural economic reforms that transformed Israel into a neo-liberal, dynamic, and growing economy. He was not deterred by criticism that his policies have harmed the disadvantaged sections of society that continue to support him.

In conclusion, each of the leaders mentioned here shows a distinct character and approach. However, they may be divided into two groups. The first group comprises Olmert, Barak, and Peres. As I see it, their common denominator is the admiration they all showed for Moshe Dayan. Like him, they are intelligent and daring, but motivated less by firm ideology than by a desire to shape Israel as a Jewish and democratic state. They sought to achieve this through a policy of activism in the security arena combined with a willingness to compromise, though not to a sufficient degree to satisfy the Palestinians. This was the product both of objective circumstances and of their collective failure to examine in depth the narrative of the other side. The second group comprises Bibi alone. Netanyahu is extremely intelligent and also seeks to maintain a Jewish and democratic state. However, Pfeffer accurately sees Netanyahu’s worldview as “part of a wider western tradition that was in tune with the conservative thinking of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher” (p. 187).