What can we learn and conclude from our review of these four books concerning the Israeli leaders of the past generation, against the background of the social and political developments in the country?

Although the four leaders represented various parties over the course of their respective and convoluted political careers, in terms of personality they share a common feature: the absolute lack of skepticism, let alone reflective capability. They also share a large ego, a characteristic that would seem to be a prerequisite for a political career and that is accompanied by the absence of self-humor. All four leaders are convinced that if they were only allowed to lead Israel for an extend period, it would reach safes shores. Even Netanyahu, who has been in power for 13 years, remains convinced that the left-wing and the elites continue to prevent him from realizing his vision. The other three leaders failed to complete even a single term of office, a fact that tells us much not only about them, but also about the restless nature of the Israeli political system.

On the level of principle, these leaders also share a basic and simple vision: To ensure Israel’s future as a Jewish and democratic state (even Netanyahu, as his biography shows, is unwilling to annex the Territories along with their Palestinian inhabitants). All of them are convinced that the way to achieve this vision primarily demands military activism, alongside a desire to reach diplomatic agreements with the backing of the US as a superpower. This approach reflects the heritage of Ben-Gurion, who laid the foundations for the security-oriented approach and for the conviction that Israel must always rely on an alliance with one of the superpowers. Accordingly, all the leaders reviewed here pride themselves on the relationships they have maintained with the US presidents, although the fact that they have all been successful in preserving the strategic alliance with the US actually suggests that the personal dimension in the form of the relations between the Israeli prime minister and the US president is of little importance. By way of example, Olmert proudly asserts that his strong relationship with George Bush Jr. allowed Israel to attack the Syrian nuclear reactor in 2006. Yet this relationship did not prevent Bush from opposing an Israeli attack on the reactor in Iraq, even when this option was raised jointly by Barak (as defense minister) and Olmert. In other words, positions are dictated by political interests, and not by the good relationships that may develop between the president and the prime minister.

Another prominent common denominator is the lack of reference to the writings of Zionist thinkers and leaders. I do not expect our leaders to be historians, but there is something grating in the superficial and instrumental way they approach the writings of Herzl, Ahad Ha’am or Jabotinsky. Olmert was raised in a Revisionist home and is capable of emphasizing the liberal dimension of the philosophy of this movement’s founder, while Netanyahu focuses primarily on Jabotinsky’s military actions. Neither leader appears to show any genuine interest in Jabotinsky’s complex character, perhaps providing a further explanation for the superficial character of contemporary public discourse.

Barak portrays himself as the heir to Rabin, a leader who did not leave a cohesive theory. Peres stressed throughout his life that he was a student of Ben-Gurion, but as I suggested I would have expected to find more historical insights in terms of their attitude to the Zionist idea in its various shades.

We may classify the four leaders in two fluctuating groups. One group includes Barak, Olmert, and Peres, while Netanyahu stands alone in the other. It is no coincidence that the members of the first group mentioned Moshe Dayan as a source of inspiration. Like Dayan, these three leaders are not committed to any clear ideology, but rather seek to make the most of any situation. The Whole Land of Israel is not an ideological target, but a function of circumstance; peace with the Palestinians is a practical imperative, rather than a moral issue that touches on the flaws that have marred Zionism since its inception. By contrast, Netanyahu has a better-developed worldview. As a politician, he is willing to change his declarations and to form shifting alliances, but his method of operation is grounded in a clear approach to which he remains loyal. This approach draws on a conservative philosophy that takes a pessimist view of human nature and of Jewish history. As early as the 1980s, Netanyahu argued that the Palestinian issue is not the core of the conflict – an approach that was also apparent in his most recent term of office. Netanyahu views the conflict as part of a struggle between the Judeo-Christian and Muslim worlds, and between West and East. Faithful to Herzl’s approach, he regards Israel as a Western bastion in the Middle East – a bastion that should be rooted in neo-liberal economic policy in the style of Margaret Thatcher, and in military preparedness consistent with the views of American Neo-Conservatives. Under his leadership, Israel has indeed been shaped in accordance with this vision.

A second classification of the leaders places Peres and Netanyahu in one group, and Olmert and Barak in the other. While both Olmert and Barak think in an essentially functional and tactical manner, the leadership actions of Peres, like those of Netanyahu, were grounded in a worldview. In Peres’s case, this worldview again drew on Herzl and Ben-Gurion, and included belief in the idea of “progress” and the assumption that humanity is moving toward a better future thanks to science and technology. His vision is an optimistic one that sought to reshape the entire Middle East, once the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians had been resolved. Peres was guided by the conviction that the world is engaged in a constant process of change, and that national and religious identities can be softened in return for technological and economic developments. Accordingly, it is no coincidence that the last ideological and fascinating elections to take place in Israel were in 1996, when Peres faced Netanyahu. Most Israelis were surprised that the majority of the electorate preferred Netanyahu’s conservative vision, just a few months after the assassination of Rabin. With hindsight, Netanyahu’s victory in 1996 may be seen as a reflection of a profoundly conservative streak in Israeli society – a dimension that explains the success of right-wing leaders in the twenty-first century.

While reading the studies, another fact comes to the foreground: how little attention Israel’s leaders have devoted to issues that go beyond questions of foreign relations and defense. Setting aside generalized comments in favor of liberal economics (and it is fascinating to see how thoroughly the leaders have disassociated themselves from the Socialist circle that once led the pre-state Jewish community and the state itself), issues such as religion and secularization, Israel’s position between East and West, tradition and progress, the ethnic gap, and so forth are mentioned only in a limited and clichéd manner.

Israel is in the midst of enormous cultural and sociological changes and is acquiring an increasingly Middle Eastern character in cultural terms. Meanwhile, it leaders, scions of the old political and defense establishment, continue to be thoroughly Ashkenazi, white, and secular. They continue to draw on the basic approaches that characterized Israel during its formative years.

Perhaps it is this fact that explains the recent flurry of biographies and autobiographies. Although some of the leaders we have discussed are still active, they would largely seem to belong to an Israeli era that has passed. The question as to when leaders will emerge from a new generation, reflecting the changes that have occurred in Israeli society and, perhaps, offering a more innovative vision, remains to be answered.