Introduction

Eighteenth-century Genevan philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau expressed thus his bewilderment at Jewish history:

The Jews provide us with an astonishing spectacle. . . . Athens, Sparta, Rome have perished and no longer have children left on earth; Zion, destroyed, has not lost its children. . . . What must be the strength of legislation capable of working such wonders, capable of braving conquests, dispersions, revolutions, exiles, capable of surviving the customs, laws, empire of all the nations . . . to last as long as the world? . . . Any man whosoever he is, must acknowledge this as a unique marvel, the causes of which, divine or human, certainly deserve the study and admiration of the sages.1

This book follows Rousseau’s advice by studying the diplomatic history of the Jewish people. It retraces and explains the Jews’ interactions with other nations from the ancient Kingdom of Israel to the modern State of Israel today.

Such an endeavor is as ambitious as it is necessary. Books on Israel’s foreign policy understandably begin with Israel’s independence in 1948, but in doing so they have lacked the wider perspective of Jewish history. They have also tended to focus exclusively on certain aspects of Israel’s foreign policy, most typically the Arab-Israeli conflict or the U.S.-Israel relationship. Seven decades after Israel’s independence, an updated and comprehensive account of Israel’s foreign policy was missing. The present book was written to fill that void.

Writing a diplomatic history of Israel is complicated by the uniqueness of that history. The astounding survival of the Jewish people throughout the centuries, after the Roman destruction of Jewish sovereignty in 70 ce, defies logic. In the words of Prof. Ruth Wisse, Jews are “comeback kids of a saga that defies historical probability.”2 British historian Arnold Toynbee had used the word “fossil” to describe the Jewish people precisely because he could not make sense of the Jews’ unexplainable survival. Pressed about the national rebirth of the Jews in the twentieth century, Toynbee conceded that “Israel has become defossilized as you can defrost a car.”3 The “defrosted car” is by now a thriving and successful country; the “fossil” has come back to life.

Diplomatic history is about statesmanship, yet the Jews were stateless for two-thirds of their three-millennia history. In antiquity, Jews were sovereign for about a millennium: under the United Monarchy (1050–930 bce); under the kingdoms of Israel (930–720 bce) and of Judah (930–586 bce); under the Yehud (Judea) Province of the Babylonian Empire (586–539 bce), the Assyrian Empire (539–332 bce), and the Greek Empire (332–140 bce); under the Hasmonean Dynasty (140–37 bce); and under the Judean province of the Roman Empire (37 bce–70 ce). With Rome’s merciless repression of the Bar Kokhba revolt in 135 ce, the Jews became stateless and dispersed. Even in exile, however, Jewish leaders negotiated with heads of states to advance Jewish interests. Fifteenth-century Spanish Jewish scholar and financier Isaac Abarbanel used his fortune to free the Jews of Arzila (Morocco) from slavery; he loaned large sums of money to the king of Spain during the Reconquista. After settling in Venice (in 1503), Abarbanel negotiated a trade treaty between the Venetian Republic and Portugal. In 1655 the Portuguese Jewish scholar and diplomat Menashe Ben-Israel convinced Oliver Cromwell to allow Jews back in England. In 1840 European Jewish politicians, such as Alfred Crémieux in France, and financiers, such as the Rothschilds in England, convinced their respective governments to pressure the Turkish sultan into ending the “Damascus Affair,” a blood libel against the Jews of Damascus. The Rothschilds served the diplomatic interests of Great Britain in the nineteenth century: they helped the British government pay for both the Crimean War (1853–56) and the Suez Canal (in 1875). Benjamin Disraeli, a British prime minister proud of his Jewish origins, advocated Jewish national revival in the Land of Israel. The Zionist movement established by Theodor Herzl in 1897 turned its leaders into diplomats decades before the establishment of the State of Israel, as Zionist activists lobbied world leaders to support the idea of Jewish statehood in the Jews’ ancient homeland. In other words, despite the lack of Jewish sovereignty for much of the Jewish people’s history, there was “Jewish diplomacy,” and it must be addressed.

About This Book

The book is divided into four parts. Part 1, “Israel and the Nations in the Hebrew Bible,” analyzes the theme of “Israel and the Nations” via exegetical readings of the Pentateuch (chapter 1), the Prophets (chapter 2), and the Writings (chapter 3). There is much to learn from the Hebrew Bible about the foreign policy of the ancient kingdoms of Israel. Furthermore, I believe one cannot understand Israel’s interaction with the world without a basic knowledge of the Hebrew Bible. The Jewish psyche was shaped and continues to be influenced by the founding document of Judaism and Jewish peoplehood. Concepts such as “a people that dwells alone,” the eternal enmity of Amalek, or messianic redemption are not comprehensible without biblical knowledge. Those concepts are intertwined with the Jews’ self-perceived historical role and their interactions with other nations. As the Bible scholar Jon Levenson argues, in the study of Jewish history “the whole truth is larger than either traditional memory or modern critical historiography can accommodate alone.”4

Part 2, “Jewish Diplomacy from Antiquity to Modernity,” includes the foreign policy of the ancient kingdoms of Israel until the Romans’ destruction of the Judean province in 70 ce (chapter 4); the diplomacy of Jewish Diasporas in Europe from the Middle Ages to Emancipation (chapter 5); the emergence of the Zionist movement in the late nineteenth century and its efforts to gather international support (chapter 6); Zionist diplomacy in the post–World War I international system (chapter 7); and the foreign policy dilemmas of the Zionist leadership in the 1930s and during World War II (chapter 8).

Part 3, “The Rebirth of Israel and the Arab-Israeli Conflict,” surveys Israel’s independence and struggle in the unwelcoming Middle East. It explains Israel’s foreign policy dilemmas at the beginning of the Cold War (chapter 9); Israel’s attempts to build alliances in a hostile Middle East (chapter 10); Israel’s wars and peace agreements with the Arab states (chapter 11); and Israel’s unresolved conflict with the Palestinians (chapter 12).

Part 4, “Israel on the World Scene,” describes and explains Israel’s foreign policy from 1948 to our days. It covers Israel’s relations with Europe (chapter 13), the United States (chapter 14), Russia (chapter 15), Asia (chapter 16), Africa (chapter 17), Latin America (chapter 18), the United Nations (chapter 19), and the Jewish Diasporas (chapter 20). The last chapter (chapter 21) explains how Israel’s foreign relations are being transformed by the changing geopolitics of energy.

The volume is necessarily not exhaustive, given the wide range of topics and long period of time covered. Rather, a central idea—or thesis—emerges from this historical survey: the Jews have survived and succeeded in their interactions with other nations thanks to a strong sense of historical mission, as well as to the constant adaptation of that mission to the real world.

This idea is encapsulated by the book’s two epigraphs.

The verse from the book of Numbers (“A star rises from Jacob, a scepter comes forth from Israel,” Num. 24:17) raises two questions: (1) if Jacob was renamed Israel, why do both names continue to appear alternatively throughout the biblical text, sometimes in the same verse; and (2) what do the star and the scepter signify? The book of Genesis describes Jacob as “a mild man who stayed in camp” and his twin brother Esau as “a skillful hunter, a man of the outdoors” (Gen. 25:27). The former was Athenian and the latter Spartan, so to speak, but individually neither man possessed the two qualities needed to carry on the legacy of Abraham and Isaac: faith and power. The Star of David symbolizes the Jewish faith, while the scepter is a symbol of power. Jacob had faith but lacked strength. He was renamed Israel only after proving his ability and willingness to fight in the real world. Yet, then as now, the balancing act between faith and power is never to be taken for granted; it is constantly challenged. Hence, it seems, the back-and-forth use of the names Jacob and Israel.

Richelieu’s quote (“Man is immortal; his salvation is hereafter. The state has no immortality; its salvation is now or never”) also relates to the dilemma between faith and power, though admittedly not from a Jewish perspective. Richelieu was both a clergyman and a statesman. As a high-ranking member of the Catholic Church, he should have sided with the Catholics in the Thirty Years’ War between Catholics and Protestants. Yet Richelieu allied with the Protestants so as to weaken the Holy Roman Empire and to secure France’s domination of the European continent. He put raison d’état (national interest) before theological preferences and even produced a formula to justify himself: because statesmen are responsible not only for their soul but also for the survival and well-being of their country, they have no other choice but to separate between faith and power. This logical twist enabled Richelieu to be ruthless and cynical while preserving his religious garments.

Diplomacy involves compromise between ideals and realpolitik, between principles and interests. Israeli diplomacy is no exception in this regard, but the diplomatic history of Israel is unique. Drawing lessons from this exceptional history is prerequisite to guaranteeing Israel’s future.