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by Emmanuel Navon (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2020),
536 pages

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In his introduction to *The Star and the Scepter*, French-born Israeli diplomatic historian Emmanuel Navon explains his motivation for writing this volume: “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” (p. xv). Of course, Navon is not the only one to identify this lacuna. His book stands alongside the recently published and highly acclaimed work by Prof. Uri Bialer (Hebrew University), *Israeli Foreign Policy: A People Shall Not Dwell Alone*.¹ Navon was well equipped to embark on this mission. He lectures on international relations at Tel Aviv University and at the Interdisciplinary Center (IDC) Herzliya and has written widely on the subject. He is also a fellow at the Jerusalem Institute for Strategy and Security (JISS) and at the Kohelet Policy Forum and is a foreign affairs analyst for the Jaffa-based French-language i24 news channel. Among his earlier books was *A Plight among the Nations: Israel’s Foreign Policy between Nationalism and Realism*.

Navon’s opus, which is mainly based on an impressive array of secondary sources, is divided into four parts, through which he takes readers along a journey that includes extensive treatment of the Hebrew Bible; a survey of Jewish diplomacy from antiquity to modernity; the rebirth of a sovereign Jewish state; and the vicissitudes of the Arab–Israeli conflict. He concludes with an evaluation of Israel’s place on the international scene today.

The author writes of the long history of the Jewish people with great clarity, chronicling its struggle for civil and religious rights, including the right of self-determination in its ancestral homeland. He compares relations with ancient leaders to those of modern times and examines the Jewish people’s interface with an array of countries in various parts of the world, as well as with leading international organizations.

Navon argues that modern Jewish and Israeli engagement with the wider world can be better understood in the context of the objectives of the Jewish people over the course of its long and dramatic history and the obstacles that stood in the way of attaining them. He presents us with a broad picture of the struggles, fears, and aspirations that led to the rebirth of Jewish sovereignty. Navon also explores

events that shaped the nation's destiny and the complicated considerations that accompanied its diplomatic efforts. Those efforts were conducted by Jewish and non-Jewish personalities, people of influence who had the ear of foreign leaders. Quite naturally, the author places great emphasis on the periods immediately prior to and after the establishment of the state.

Navon's central thesis is the assertion that the faith and pragmatism of the Jewish people have enabled them to overcome challenges and make progress in unfriendly environments around the world and throughout history. Diplomacy is about balancing ideals with realpolitik and Israel's diplomacy is no exception, although it has its own unique characteristics (p. 411). Zionist leaders, Navon notes, understood that their "diplomacy had to strike compromises between their aspirations, constraints, and interests" (p. 412).

The power behind the survival of the Jewish people—its strong will to endure—is reflected in the book's title by the Star of David, the symbol of faith, and in the scepter, which represents political power. That duality is part of Jewish identity—encompassing both a religion and a nation (p. 411). Throughout most of their history, Jews were deprived of the scepter; statelessness left them with the star alone. The eternal balance between faith and power, between the star and the scepter, has remained deeply embedded in the core of Israel's moral and political efforts to win acceptance among the nations. In fact, "Jewish diplomacy" has always existed in one form or another even in the absence of Jewish sovereignty (p. xvii).

Navon posits that what emerges from his survey is that "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 the mission to the real world" (p. xviii).

Although his book follows historical events in a manner that readers will generally appreciate, this reviewer feels somewhat uncomfortable with Navon's statement that "the widespread idea that the UN 'created' the State of Israel in November 1947 is a myth" (p. 131). That assertion is based on the fact that General Assembly resolutions are not binding and that the Arab states rejected Resolution 181 that called for a partition of Palestine/the Land of Israel and the creation of both a Jewish state and an Arab one. Both arguments are factually correct. Indeed, the UN did not "create" the State of Israel. Yet the thought of minimizing the significance of the vote at Flushing Meadows oddly disregards the outstanding efforts by the Zionist movement to win a majority for that historic decision and stands in sharp contrast to the jubilation of hundreds of thousands of Jews who flocked to the streets upon hearing that the resolution had been approved. For them it was a kind of call to change Jewish history, a momentous political message of international legitimacy by the organization representing the family

of nations—that is, before the UN’s reputation was sullied by its visceral anti-Israel stance that culminated in the infamous 1975 “Zionism is Racism” resolution.

Navon repeatedly emphasizes that Israel’s diplomatic challenges can only be assessed in the wider context of Jewish history (p. 414) and that “... one cannot understand Israel’s interaction with the rest of the world without basic knowledge of the Bible” (p. xvii). He further argues that “drawing lessons from [Israel’s] exceptional history is prerequisite to guaranteeing Israel’s future” (p. xix). From my own experience, such theses are somewhat artificial. No one can dispute the uniqueness of our history, but we practitioners of diplomacy act in accordance with accepted professional standards, advancing our interests to the best of our abilities and with an awareness of the sensitivities of others.

Knowledge of the Bible, of course, is to be commended, but in our diplomatic demarches, references to Scripture do not carry much weight, and when traditional Jewish texts are cited, they sometimes precipitate an antagonistic response. The issues of security, trade, tourism, scientific innovation, and research and development align with the concerns of the rest of the world and have little connection with insights gleaned from the Bible, however uplifting or instructive.

Had Navon access to classified material (which, of course, he did not, as many government files on foreign relations are kept sealed for fifty years or more), he could have delved into a sea of reports, some quite amazing, of diplomatic contacts and longstanding personal relations between many Israeli diplomats and leaders around the globe. One day, those documents will reveal the full extent to which Israeli diplomacy evolved from desperate lobbying attempts to exchanges between equals, and on many occasions exchanges with leaders who now look admirably at the Jewish State and its achievements. That is so, contrary to the widespread perception that “the whole world is against us.” So much for the baseless notion of the “people that shall dwell alone.”

In a book of this breadth, errors will inevitably creep in. One example is in Navon’s account of the early Jewish pioneers, in which he states that the “Russian Jews emigrating to the Land of Israel in 1882 soon established settlements such as Rishon LeZion, Rosh Pina, and Zikhron Yaakov” (p. 70). The fact is that Rosh Pina and Zikhron Yaakov were established mainly by Romanian Jews, which remains a source of pride to Jews of Romanian origin in modern-day Israel and the small Jewish community that still exists in Romania.

Finally, the inclusion of maps is helpful to readers as is the glossary, notes, and index, which are extensive and reveal a vast array of references that will be especially useful to historians, those interested in the Bible, and in fact anyone curious about Jewish history. Navon deserves praise for his vast and in-depth

coverage of a large number of dramatic historical events throughout Jewish and Israeli history. His book makes for enjoyable and thought-provoking reading.

Note

- ¹ For a review of that book, see Alfred Tovias, *The Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs*, XIV:2 (2020), 327–30.