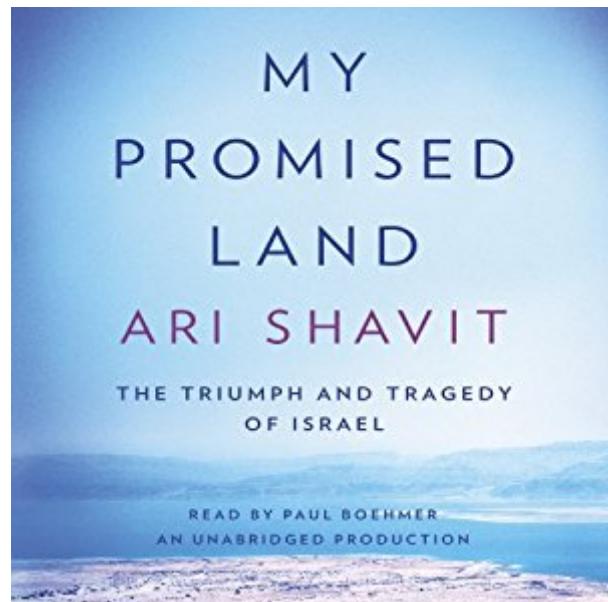


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My Promised Land: The Triumph And Tragedy Of Israel



Synopsis

Winner of the Natan Book Award An authoritative and deeply personal narrative history of the State of Israel, by one of the most influential journalists writing about the Middle East today. Not since Thomas L. Friedman's groundbreaking From Beirut to Jerusalem has a book captured the essence and the beating heart of the Middle East as keenly and dynamically as My Promised Land. Facing unprecedented internal and external pressures, Israel today is at a moment of existential crisis. Ari Shavit draws on interviews, historical documents, private diaries, and letters, as well as his own family's story, illuminating the pivotal moments of the Zionist century to tell a riveting narrative that is larger than the sum of its parts: both personal and national, both deeply human and of profound historical dimension.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

This book is a beautifully written and deeply reported attempt to explain Israel to Israelis and to the world. The author is candid about his own perspective -- a "left-wing journalist," an "anti-occupation peacenik," yet nonetheless one genuinely aspiring to be balanced and fair. His great grandfather Herbert Bentwich arrived in Israel in 1897, and at the beginning and end of the book the author retraces Bentwich's steps. Pro-Israel American Jews such as myself will find this book troubling. It argues that the crux of the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians is not the 1967 Six-Day War and the occupation that resulted, but rather the events of 1948. It recounts (though without footnotes, and in a chapter that may well be challenged by other historians) an episode in 1948 in

which, the author says, David Ben Gurion and Yitzhak Rabin ordered the expulsion of 35,000 Palestinian Arabs from the city of Lydda. For all his directness about what he calls "the tragedy of 1948," Shalit is proud of what he calls the "miracle" of Zionism. He writes about Israel's orange groves, its wineries, its high-tech industry, its absorption of Jewish refugees from the Holocaust and from North Africa, Yemen, and Iraq, its music scene. He is critical of the Israeli peace movement for imagining that the threat to Israel's existence can be solved and peace achieved by withdrawing from the West bank and Gaza, and he is clear-eyed in describing the threats Israel faces from a nuclear-armed Iran and from the surrounding Muslims, Arabs, and Palestinian Arabs.

I'm afraid I can't share the enthusiasm that most reviewers have for this book. The author is a terribly conflicted individual (with which I sympathize) and this book is just all over the map. It's hard to know where to begin with my review, but I'm going to break it down into three parts. 1. The Good: I have to give Mr. Shavit credit where credit is due. He goes way out on a limb with his very descriptive tale of what happened to one Palestinian town in 1948. This isn't easy for any Jew or Israeli to do. Most Jewish authors will shy away from this subject. It's almost totally taboo to acknowledge such things. Authors such as Benny Morris and Ilan Pappe have been severely ostracized for writing very detailed accounts of this sordid side of Israeli history. Also, I believe that most Jews (at least American Jews) are terribly ignorant about this topic. This chapter will probably be read by many Jews and I do think that knowledge is the beginning of progress. Shavit also shares some of his experiences in Gaza while he was in the IDF. I must admit that I was pretty shocked by the daily torture events that took place there. My own ignorance on this particular topic became very obvious to me. Many young stone throwers were undoubtedly turned into real terrorists after being subjected to the Israeli torture tactics. It isn't a pretty story, but it is an important story and I thank Shavit for sharing what he heard and saw while serving in the military. 2. The Bad: I am not a big fan of Shavit's style of writing. There are endless stories about Jews coming to Israel and planting oranges, olives, pomegranates or whatever. This tale doesn't need to be told 29 times in order to make his point. Less would have been a lot more.

This is a history of the major issues facing Israel, told through anecdote, family stories, and interviews with the top players. Though not comprehensive, which left many gaps of incident and detail, it is truly excellent for its clarity of vision, impartiality, and frank acknowledgment of the irreconcilable contradictions and paradoxes at the heart of Israel. I was completely absorbed through the entire book and learned an immense amount from it. The book begins with a description

of the original Zionist vision, coming out of 19C nationalism and directed to the reunification of a long-abused people. Shavit's great-grandfather, a successful businessman in England, was among the founding fathers who first came to visit Palestine, when less than 10% of the population was Jewish. They and others bought up land and began to set up farms and eventually, quasi-communistic kibbutzes. It was to save Jews who faced violent pogroms in E Europe, or at least discrimination elsewhere, as well as to empower them. At the start, most Zionists believed that the Jews could live side by side with the Arabs. These chapters almost put me off the book, as they are written with a kind of wistful sentimentality and pride in the way the settlers began to re-shape the desert into productive farms. Fortunately, the pace picks up once they face conflict with the Arabs and, following WWII, set up the state of Israel. It was the coverage of 1948 that most impressed me. Shavit is absolutely clear about the ambiguity and hypocrisy at the heart of the founding of the Israeli nation-state.

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