

Commentary

MAY 1998 ISRAEL

The Miracle

Destiny, and the events of a terrible century, mark the leaders, the citizens, and the nation of Israel.

by **Paul Johnson**

THE STATE OF ISRAEL IS THE PRODUCT OF MORE THAN 4,000 YEARS OF JEWISH history. “If you want to understand our country, read this!” said David Ben-Gurion on the first occasion I met him, in 1957. And he slapped the Bible. But the creation and survival of Israel are also very much a 20th-century phenomenon, one that could not have happened without the violence and cruelty, the agonies, confusions, and cross-currents of our tragic age. It could even be argued that Israel is the most characteristic single product, and its creation the quintessential event, of this century.

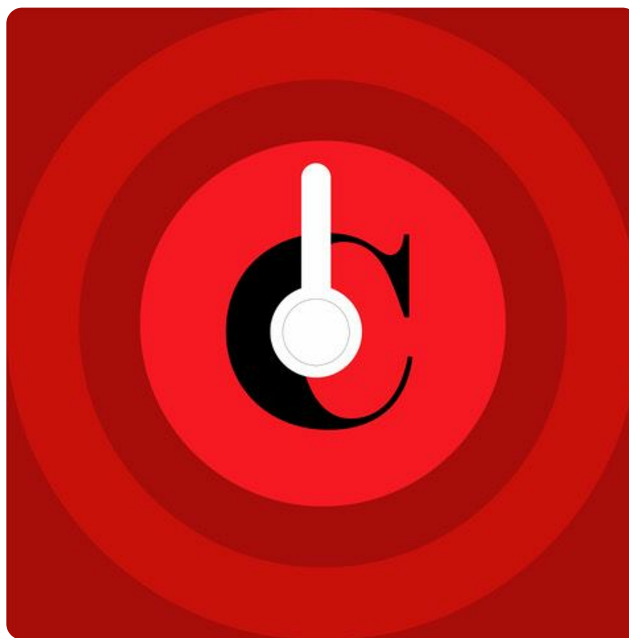
Certainly, you cannot study Israel without traveling the historical highroads and many of the byroads of the times, beginning with the outbreak of World War I in 1914. That great watershed between an age of peace and moderation and one of violence and extremism set the pattern for all that followed, and marked a turning point as well in the fortunes of Zionism.

Theodor Herzl’s Zion, a product of the 1890’s, was not exactly a modest proposal, but it could fairly be described as a moderate one. His book was entitled *Der Judenstaat*, and that phrase—a “state of the Jews”—fairly describes what he had in mind. But he was not necessarily wedded to the historical dream of a state in Palestine. He toyed, for example, with the notion of a giant settlement in

Argentina, and not until the Seventh Zionist Congress in 1905 was Uganda, too, finally rejected as a possible site. By that time Herzl was dead, at the age of forty-four. One of his last pronouncements had been: “Palestine is the only land where our people can come to rest.”

Uncertainties and ambivalences of other kinds abounded. Although Herzl had always used the word “sovereignty” in connection with his imagined Jewish state, his friend Max Nordau, the philosopher, believed that in order to avoid offending the Turks, of whose empire Palestine then formed a part, the term *Judenstaat* should be replaced by *Heimstätte*, or homestead, rendered into English as “national home.” This fortuitously became an important factor in winning acceptance for the Zionist idea among European statesmen. Similarly, Herzl had written of a huge “expedition” that would “take possession of the land,” but the idea that the land would actually have to be conquered, and then fiercely defended, does not seem to have occurred to him.

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As for the arrangements of life in his future commonwealth, Herzl was enamored of the model of Venice at the height of its power. He imagined a Venetian-style constitution, a Jewish *doge*, a coronation ceremony, and city plans featuring huge squares like the Piazza San Marco. He also foresaw theaters, circuses, café-concerts, and an enormous opera house specializing in Wagner, his favorite. The only military touch was to be a guards regiment, the Herzl-Cuirassiers, for ceremonial occasions; the New Zion would not, he thought, need much of an army. In many ways, Herzl's conception had more in common with the Ruritania of Anthony Hope's novels than with the state that actually came into being a little over four decades after his death.

World War I had a double effect on Zionism, transforming its program from a theoretical into a real possibility but also ensuring that the creation of the Jewish state would be bloody. Until 1914, the men who ran the British empire, though sympathetic to Zionism, were inclined to fob off Jewish leaders with schemes for developing a slice of Africa. Turkey was a traditional British ally, and keeping its ramshackle possessions together was a prime object of British policy. What put an end to all that was the fateful decision of the Turks to join the side of Germany in the war. In a dramatic speech in November 1914, the British Prime Minister, H.H. Asquith, announced: "The Turkish empire has committed suicide."

Immediately, a Palestinian Zion became conceivable, and what would be known as the Balfour Declaration was in train. But the British decision to end the Turkish empire in the Middle East also presupposed the existence of new *Arab* states as well, and inevitably brought into being Arab nationalism. It is here that Herzl's initiative and dynamism proved to be so crucial. Timing is all-important in history. No doubt a Zionist political movement would in due course have come into existence without Herzl. By launching it in the 1890's, Herzl gave the Jews, in

effect, a twenty-year headstart over the Arabs. Even before the war began, Zionist leaders had been in touch with leading British policy-makers, and they exploited the possibilities produced by the war with great energy and sophistication.

It is amazing, in retrospect, that the Zionists were able to secure the Balfour Declaration—ensuring the “best endeavors” of the British government to achieve “the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people”—in 1917, while the war was still undecided, thus preempting the postwar negotiations and settlements of national claims. By the time the Arabs got themselves organized as an international pressure group, at the Versailles Peace Conference, it was too late. They did win their Arab states, but the Jews had already gained their national home and were settling it with all deliberate speed.

But World War I also introduced unprecedented degrees of violence and extremism into the world, and these too held consequences for the future of Israel. Gone was any possibility that the Jewish national home might integrate itself peacefully with its Arab neighbors, paying for its presence in their midst by teaching them the modern arts of agriculture and commerce. The so-called Arab Revolt that began in 1936 and that was encouraged and rewarded by the British mandatory power confirmed local Arab leaders in the view that their most promising option against the Zionists was force. What had driven out the Turks and created the new Arab states could also be employed, in due course, to extirpate the Jews. This became a fixed Arab notion, so that in time, both within Palestine and across the Middle East as a whole, Arab leaders, faced with the choice of negotiation or war would invariably choose war—and invariably lose.

The violence bred by the searing years 1914-18 also decisively changed the moral climate of Europe, again with fateful results for the future Jewish state. In the wake of the war, extremist regimes seized power and ruled by force and terror—first in Russia, then in Italy, and finally in Germany. The transformation of Germany from the best-educated society in Europe into a totalitarian race-state was, of course, determinative. Although the anti-Semites of Central Europe had always treated Jews with varying degrees of cruelty and injustice, up to and

including murderous pogroms and expulsion, it was only with Hitler that actual extermination became a possible program. The outbreak of World War II provided the covering darkness to make it not just possible but practical.

The Holocaust destroyed by far the greater proportion of European Jews, the pool from which Zionism had drawn both recruits and moral fervor. But it also united much of the rest of world Jewry behind the Zionist project, and brought into existence the American Jewish lobby, the prototype of all the great lobbies of the later 20th century. In the perspective of the Holocaust, moreover, it became clear that Zion had to be not merely a “national home” but a refuge, and a fortress. Finally, the Holocaust spurred the Palestinian Jews (and the refugees who joined them) to create the military means to defend the citadel. If World War I created the new Zion, it was World War II that made possible the Israeli army.

In the last half-century, over 100 completely new independent states have come into existence. Israel is the only one whose creation can fairly be called a miracle.

I observed the drama of 1948-49 from the security of an ancient Oxford college, where I was an undergraduate. Academic opinion was then, on balance, favorable to the new Zion: many dons had been brought up in the philo-Semitic tradition of *Daniel Deronda* (1876), George Eliot’s novel about a young man who discovers his identity as a Jew and dedicates himself to the Zionist cause, and they welcomed Israel as an intellectual and moral artifact. But opinion was also virtually unanimous that the state would be crushed. That was assuredly the view of most governments and military staffs: the notion of the Jew as a soldier had not yet captured the Western imagination.

In 1948, the Haganah, Israel’s defense force, had 21,000 men, as against a professional Arab invading army of 10,000 Egyptians, 4,500 in Jordan’s Arab Legion, 7,000 Syrians, 3,000 Iraqis, and 3,000 Lebanese—plus the “Arab Liberation Army” of Palestinians. In equipment, including armor and air power,

the odds were similarly heavy against Israel. Revisionist historians (including Israeli ones) now portray the War of Independence as a deliberate Zionist land grab, involving the use of terrorism to panic Arabs into quitting their farms and homes. They ignore the central fact that the Zionist leaders did not want war but rather feared it as a risk to be taken only if there was absolutely no alternative. That is why in 1947 the Zionist leadership had accepted the United Nations partition scheme, which would have given the nascent state only 5,500 square miles, chiefly in the Negev desert, and would have created an impossible entity of 538,000 Jews and 397,000 Arabs. Arab rejection of this scheme was an act of supreme folly.

Of course the Jews fought heroically, and performed prodigies of improvisation: they had to—it was either that or extermination. No doubt they fought savagely, too, on occasion, and committed acts that might appear to lend some coloring to the revisionist case. But as a whole that case is historically false. It was the Arab leadership, by its obduracy and its ready resort to force, that was responsible for the somewhat enlarged Israel that emerged after the 1949 armistice, and the same mind-set would create the more greatly enlarged Israel that emerged after the Six-Day War of 1967. In another of the paradoxes of history, the frontiers of the state, as they exist today, were as much the doing of the Arabs as of the Jews. If it had been left to the UN, tiny Zion probably could not have survived.

Another Paradoxical aspect of the Zionist miracle, which we certainly did not grasp at the time and which is insufficiently understood even now, is that among the founding fathers of Israel was Joseph Stalin. Stalin had no love for Jews; quite the contrary, he murdered them whenever it suited his purposes. In his last phase, indeed, he was becoming increasingly paranoid; had he lived, he might well have carried out an extermination program rivaling Hitler's. Moreover, like Lenin before him, Stalin had always opposed Zionism. He did so not only as a Great Russian imperialist but as a Marxist, and he was consistent on the matter up to the end of

World War II and again from 1950 to his death in 1953. But during the crucial years 1947-48, he was guided by temporary considerations of *Realpolitik*, and specifically by what he saw as the threat of British imperialism.

Stalin ignorantly supposed that the way to undermine Britain's position in the Middle East was to support the Jews, not the Arabs, and he backed Zionism in order to break the "British stranglehold." Not only did he extend diplomatic recognition to Israel but, in order to intensify the fighting and the consequent chaos, he instructed the Czech government to sell it arms. The Czechs turned over an entire military airfield to shuttle weaponry to Tel Aviv; the Messerschmitt aircraft they supplied were of particular importance. Then, in mid-August 1948, Stalin decided he had made a huge error in judgment, and the obedient Czech government ordered a halt to the airlift within 48 hours. But by then the war had effectively been won.

The fledgling Israeli state was equally fortunate when it came to America, benefiting from a phase of benevolence that once again might not have lasted. President Truman was pro-Zionist, and he needed the Jewish vote in the 1948 election. It was his decision to push the partition scheme through the UN in November 1947 and to recognize the new Israeli state (*de facto*, not *de jure*) when it was declared in May 1948. But the contrary pressure he had to face, both from the State Department under George C. Marshall and from his Defense Secretary, James V. Forrestal, was immense. If the crisis had come a year later, after the cold war started to dominate the thinking of the West to the exclusion of almost everything else, it is likely that the anti-Zionist forces would have proved too strong for Truman. As it was, American backing for Israel in 1947-48 was the last idealistic luxury the Americans permitted themselves before the realities of global confrontation descended.

Thus, in terms both of Soviet and of American policy, Israel slipped into existence through a window that briefly opened, and just as suddenly closed. Once again, timing—or, if one likes, providence—was of the essence.

If it took a half-century to transform Zionism from an idea into a reality, the reality is itself now a half-century old. Both 50-year periods illustrate the extraordinary interplay, so fascinating to a historian, between the force of ideas and the accidents of time and chance.

Herzl's Zion was seen, by him at any rate, in terms of a visual drama. His great love was show business; he boasted that "the next Exodus to the Promised Land" would outshine "that of Moses," just as a "Wagnerian opera" outshone a "Shrove Tuesday play." He opened the Second Zionist Congress in 1898 with the overture from *Tannhäuser*; insisted that delegates wear full evening dress with white tie at formal sessions; and imposed luxurious sumptuary regulations, based on the highest Western standards. The *Judenstaat* was to be a grand affair, as far from ghetto and gabardine as possible.

That was the one image: Zion as a glittering renaissance, a new City of David, painted in the strongest of colors. But there were two competing images. First there was the vision of the pious Jew, for whom Zion was a *religious* event, and the creation of a materialistic national home, let alone of a sovereign secular state, was an irrelevancy at best. Such Jews returned to Palestine, and then Israel, to pray and observe religious law and to encourage (and, where possible, compel) others to do likewise. They were there before modern Zionism got under way and they are still there, in much greater numbers, offering an alternative vision and wielding with persistence such political power as they can secure.

Then there was the vision of the actual pioneers who came to redeem and work the land and make the waste places bloom, whether as independent farmers or, more usually, as members of a kibbutz or a cooperative. They were colonists but also, for the most part, democrats, egalitarians, and socialists. It would be hard to say whether their image of Zion was farther removed from Herzl's Venetian-style

oligarchy or from the religious Zion of the pious. Literally and figuratively they rejected both gabardine and white-tie-and-tails, settling for open-necked shirts unadorned by starch or tie.

Though little else in the three visions was realized, the open-necked shirt did become the uniform of Israeli politicians during the state's formative period. And in another respect, too, the colonizing founder-farmers left an imprint on the new state and society that so far has proved almost ineffaceable.

These Ashkenazi Jews, mainly from Eastern Europe, were colonists despite themselves. They were taking up land that had not been farmed before, or had been poorly farmed, in exactly the same way as many of their non-Jewish contemporaries who were settling in Rhodesia, or Kenya, or Argentina, or the Maghreb. But they also wanted to differentiate themselves from those foot soldiers of the colonial empires, as well as from the whole structure of capitalist accumulation. So, partly out of intention, partly out of necessity, and partly under the influence of the Tolstoyan communitarian spirit of Russia, whence many of the most active leaders came, first the national home and then Israel itself grew up under what would later be called a "mixed economy," in which the public sector was the determining ingredient.

The small but complex state whose foundation David Ben-Gurion superintended contained many entrepreneurial elements. But these elements were usually held in the hands of the state or other collectivist institutions like the trade unions, which owned property on a huge scale. For purposes of defense, indeed of sheer survival, Israel had to have a "military-industrial complex" (to use the later formulation of President Dwight D. Eisenhower). This too was a publicly owned network, and the imperative needs of defense took priority over the market at every point. In a sense, embattled Israel had, and had to have, a command economy, one in which government gave most of the orders and the private sector and the enterprising spirit struggled against wartime levels of taxation and a forbidding density of regulations. No one got rich, legally at least. Businessmen crouched low in the social pecking order.

Was David Ben-Gurion himself a socialist? He was undoubtedly an idealist of sorts. He was also a master of *Realpolitik*, and an improviser of genius. He radiated strength, energy, passion, and an intelligence that oscillated disconcertingly from subtlety to brute power. His Zionism, though unblushingly secular in theory, had quasi-religious or at any rate metaphysical overtones. He spanned biblical categories—now the prophet inspired, now King David—and he was protean, switching from one role to the next as occasion required. In short, he was an original. But he certainly thought of himself as a socialist.

Was his Israel socialist? Revisionist historians ruefully deny the claim, portraying the country instead as a pseudo-socialist enterprise in which the overriding demands of nationalism took precedence over humanitarian values.¹ That, however, was certainly not the way people on the Left, including me at the time, thought of the matter.

Let us get our categories clear here. In the 1950's, it was already horrifyingly apparent that the "Socialist Sixth of the World" under Soviet domination was a murderous caricature, incapable of producing prosperity, justice, or security. As for the social-democratic welfare states of Europe, these were tame and feeble affairs and, to the sharp-eyed, already moribund. But Israel seemed somehow different. To visit the country was to get not just a whiff but huge lungful of realized socialism at its best—and at its most exhausting. (Kingsley Martin, my old editor at the left-wing *New Statesman*, used to say: "Israel is the only country in the world where every official, from highest to lowest, seems to be an intellectual, and you can debate with them half the night.")

Nevertheless, the revisionists do have a kind of point, if not the one they intend. The fact that many of the Zionist settlers in the early 20th century called themselves socialists obscures the fundamental antagonism between Zionism and socialism, whether it be socialism of the internationalist variety, which always saw the Zionists as traitors to the ideals of working-class solidarity, or socialism of the national kind, which was usually anti-Semitic anyway. Most of the anti-Semitic parties that began to form in Central Europe starting in the late 1870's had the

word “socialist” in their title. Wilhelm Marr, who coined the term “anti-Semitism,” was a socialist-anarchist, and the Christian Socialist Workers party was the first to adopt an openly anti-Semitic platform. Karl Lueger, the notorious anti-Semitic mayor of Vienna, called himself a socialist. In turning the German Workers party into an anti-Semitic organization, Hitler was thus in a tradition already nearly half a century old.

If, then, the founding fathers of Israel did diverge from the path of socialist priorities into the path of Jewish national ones, as the revisionists accuse them of having done, it is to their everlasting credit.

Whatever hybrid political form the young state took, one thing it was not and could not be was a light unto its closest neighbors. The 1948-49 war ended not in peace but in an armistice, followed over the ensuing decades by a desperate arms race, Arab economic boycott, horrific acts of violence, and outright war. Although the returning Jews came eager to teach the arts of peace, they repeatedly had to confront their neighbors instead on the fields of battle, and constantly had to hone their military skills to stay ahead.

This is not to say that the old dream of reconciliation fell by the wayside. Some Israeli public figures, indeed, became fond of arguing that Arab hatred of Israel was a case of mistaken identity: the Arabs wrongly saw the Jewish state as a colonizing power, a foothold of Western imperialism, or a 20th-century version of the medieval Crusader kingdom. To correct this unfortunate image, Israel would have to “go native,” becoming a genuine Middle Eastern state with the geopolitical priorities and instincts of its neighbors. It would have to adopt a low profile, and a local one.

Despite the manifest utopianism of this idea, the ruling Labor coalition flirted with a policy based on it for many years. The idea was impractical for a number of reasons. In the first place, Israel could not dispense with its military and financial

umbilical cord to the United States, the *fons et origo* of “Western imperialism.” Second, Israel was not, and could not become, a Middle Eastern state like other Middle Eastern states, nor could its people successfully pretend to be (as it were) Jewish Arabs.

An irony here is that there were indeed plenty of Jewish Middle Easterners in Israel: the (misnamed) Sephardim who flocked there in fear and poverty after being driven out of the Arab world. But these arrivals, far from leavening the Western-formed majority with a local yeast, pushed in the opposite direction. Having suffered at Arab hands, they had none of the dreamy good will of some Ashkenazi founders and their successors. To the contrary, the Sephardim saw Arab and Israeli interests as clearly distinct, and clearly incompatible. Having come to Israel precisely because it was *not* a Middle Eastern state like the rest, they sought to keep it that way.

In due course, these Jewish Middle Easterners played a crucial role in Israeli politics, decisively helping to bring about the fall of Labor and the end of the first phase of Israel’s existence: the phase of socialist ideals and illusions, of high hopes deferred and grand visions unrealized. Now, starting in 1977, came the second phase—the phase of resigned realism—which, two decades later, is still with us.

After many dogged years as the leader of the parliamentary opposition, Menachem Begin came to power in 1977 at the head of the victorious Likud coalition. Begin was not as important in Israel’s history as Ben-Gurion, but he ran a close second, and the two granitic men had much in common. Both of them were stiff-necked, opinionated, obstinate, and, so far as I could see, totally lacking in fear. But Begin, who spent the early years of World War II in Eastern Europe, was also bitter in a way that Ben-Gurion was not. He had good reason: in 1939, his home town, Brest-Litovsk, had contained over 30,000 Jews, making up 70 percent of the population. By 1944, only ten were left alive, and the dead included most of Begin’s family. He seemed ever after to be in perpetual mourning.

Begin spurned the semi-bohemian style of the Israeli political class; in office, he and his men wore neat business suits with dark ties. But if this sartorial choice could be thought of as signaling the end of naive idealism, Begin was too energized by memories and by his sense of righteousness to be a genuine realist. If anything, contrariness was his outstanding characteristic—and, to me at least, a delight. In 1979 I sat next to him in Jerusalem at the opening session of a conference on international terrorism that had been put together by the young Benjamin Netanyahu. Just before Begin spoke, I said to him, “Prime Minister, if I were you, I would not mention the King David Hotel affair.” (As the leader of the underground Irgun in pre-state Palestine, Begin had given the order in July 1946 to blow up a section of the hotel that housed offices of the British mandatory government, causing extensive loss of life.) He replied: “Mr. Johnson, you have persuaded me that I should not merely mention it, I should *emphasize* it.” And he did.

Before he finally became Prime Minister, Begin had lost, I calculate, more general elections than any other party leader in the history of democracy. So he had certainly learned patience. But once in power, he knew how to act decisively. Two of the most salutary events in Israel’s history can be laid at his feet: peace with Egypt, and the destruction of the Iraqi nuclear reactor at Osirak. In the 1960’s, I had written a long article about Israel entitled “The Militant Peacemaker.” The fierce, sorrowing, tragic figure of Begin came, for me, to personify that paradox.

Peace with Egypt made all the difference to Israel’s security. I often feared for the country in the 1950’s and 1960’s, and even after its victory in the Yom Kippur War of 1973. But once Anwar Sadat, a serious and far-sighted man, signed the Camp David accords, I breathed easier. Israel, I thought, was now safe for the foreseeable future. Thanks to Israel’s policy of realism, sometimes a necessary ultra-realism, a process of accommodation with Israel’s neighbors had been made possible. Since the time of Begin, that process has been inching forward.

Almost as fortunate as the peace with Egypt was the collapse of Soviet Communism. The return of Russia to the ranks of the conventional great powers removed the last serious hope of the Arab extremists that, if only they waited and fought long enough, they would get the kind of apocalyptic solution they desired to the “problem” of Israel. Russia will undoubtedly remain an important factor in the Middle East, and will occasionally cause trouble there—especially as the country comes to develop less confused policies than at present. But today, as in the 19th century, Russia once again operates within the parameters of a moral code, and for Israel that can mean a great deal.

To be sure, some of Israel’s enemies have remained intractable, while others wait to see what time and opportunity will afford: there will be many an agonizing passage to negotiate before the country can ever breathe easy. That is precisely why in my judgment it is a singularly lucky thing that Benjamin Netanyahu is now the Prime Minister. Like both Ben-Gurion and Begin, his two great predecessors, he is a figure who inspires fierce criticism and even hatred. Although ideologically akin to Begin, in his combination of ruthlessness tempered by idealism he actually reminds me more of Ben-Gurion. His geopolitical approach, too, is similar to Ben-Gurion’s, although, having been a diplomat, he also knows how to be smooth where Ben-Gurion—let us not forget!—was much rougher.

Netanyahu differs from Ben-Gurion in his determination to unscramble the collectivist framework inherited from the state’s youthful days. This is a very good thing: Israel is due—overdue—for Thatcherization and privatization. But given its obdurate and in certain respects arthritic economy, the task is huge. There are some people, ranging from pious Jews to left-wing fundamentalists, who do not want Israel to become rich. One may sympathize with them; but they are in a minority, and Israel is a democracy whose citizens, including its Arab citizens, want the material blessings of life.

Such, at any rate, is the way ahead. Today’s global economy puts the emphasis on educated and motivated people, and in this sphere Israel has a decided advantage. When the great migration of Russian Jews began in the late 1980’s, it was the

fashion to protest that the country really needed more farmers and craftsmen, not more university professors. I recall Shimon Peres's joke about going to Ben-Gurion airport to greet some new arrivals. "You see," complained the official standing next to him, "they're all concert violinists—look at the cases they're carrying." "That man doesn't have a case," Peres pointed out hopefully. Came the reply: "He's a pianist." On the whole, these brilliant soloists are faring well in Israel, at whatever they have learned to do, and their children will fare better.

The real task, and one that Netanyahu is well equipped to handle, is to create a society where—under conditions of peace—the clever children of Israel will want to stay, and where they can be confident they will flourish. Israel is an elite nation; in my opinion, that is what it *should* be, and unashamedly so, encouraging and training its people to be in the vanguard of the world's activity in agriculture and industry, in technology, in the arts, in education and administration, in the conquest and the preservation of nature. Israel must have its place among the nations (to borrow the title of a book by its Prime Minister). But it is not a nation *like* other nations. Willy-nilly, it is and will continue to be *sui generis*, its people shaped by the terrible events of our century, and marked by destiny.

¹ See, for instance, Zeev Sternhell, *The Founding Myths of Israel* (Princeton, 419 pp., \$29.95).
