

## ISRAEL AFFAIRS

## Getting to the promised land

Political economist Bernard Avishai makes it all sound so simple, as he cuts through a thicket of controversies to offer Israel a blueprint for a better second 60 years

## The Hebrew Republic

How Secular Democracy and Global Enterprise Will Bring Israel Peace at Last, by Bernard Avishai  
Harcourt, 304 pages, \$26

## By Marcus Rubin

To a soft-power, peace-loving European like me, the solution to Israel's problems often seems so obvious that it's difficult to grasp why the Israelis – otherwise such a resourceful and ingenious people – did not choose it long ago. Which is exactly why reading the political economist Bernard Avishai's new book, "The Hebrew Republic," is an unmitigated pleasure. Here, at last, is someone who gets it. A Jewish patriot who came to Israel to volunteer in '67, and has lived on and off in the country since then, Avishai is able to cut through the endless discussions and proposals and in clear-cut prose explain what Israel should do to get out of the quagmire with the Palestinians and the occupation.

Getting to the promised land that Avishai refers to as the "Hebrew Republic" requires four steps: First, Israel must find and define its boundaries, and for Avishai – as for most Europeans – that really doesn't seem so difficult. Israel must withdraw to the '67 borders, agree to the Palestinians establishing a state whose capital is in East Jerusalem, and agree – presumably with the Palestinians – to international forces in the Old City.

True, the pre-1967 border is not really a border but a cease-fire line, and yes, there are good arguments that it's not the best possible border for Israel (or Palestine). But the Green Line is the only border there is, and even if many Israelis have managed to erase it in their heads and from their maps, there really is no alternative. It is the only solution that will be seen as legitimate by the Palestinians, the Arab world and indeed most of the rest of the world.

Even these concessions may not mean peace right away, and for Avishai there is no need to remove settlers or an Israel Defense Forces presence before an agreement is reached. But Israel must make it clear right now that this is what it is willing to do.

Second, the State of Israel must adopt a written constitution and a bill of rights that together will guarantee all citizens equal rights. No more Law of Return. The path to citizenship must be equal for all if they comply with the conditions, which Avishai thinks should be learning Hebrew and five years of residency. Third, there must also be equality in the field of property ownership and national service.

Non-Jews must have the opportunity to purchase the same land for the same prices and with the same kind of conditions – including loans – as Jews, and all citizens must do some kind of national service.

Finally, Israel must separate state and religion. The stranglehold of the rabbinate must be broken, and services like marriage, divorce and burial must be available outside the religious system.

This should not be revolutionary stuff. As Avishai points out, demands like these would scarcely merit a headline if they were presented in, say, the European



A Bansky mural that appeared on the security barrier in Bethlehem last December.

Reuters

### As Dr. Phil might say, how have its current policies worked out for Israel?

Union's negotiations with Turkey for possible membership. Borders, withdrawal from occupied lands and equality for all citizens – all these should be par for the course in any advanced Western society, and are so obvious that they are simply taken for granted everywhere in Europe.

But of course things are not so simple. As everyone who has spent time in Israel – including Bernard Avishai – knows, many if not most Israelis would see these four simple steps as the beginning of the end of Israel. Even to many otherwise liberal and enlightened Jewish Israelis, these are fighting words, and combined with the suggestions Avishai makes elsewhere in his book for a kind of federal arrangement between Israel and the coming Palestinian state – and perhaps even Jordan – it would be political suicide for most Israeli politicians to champion.

### 'But we have survived'

This refusal is grounded in a deep-seated skepticism among many Israelis to even entertain the idea of real peace with the Arabs. Not the cold kind Israel has with Jordan and Egypt, but a real one, with trust on both sides. And that is perhaps the most difficult thing for an outsider to understand. After all, as Dr. Phil might say, how has the current policy worked out for Israel? There are guards against bombers in front of every cafe, it's been deemed necessary to build a highly controversial security barrier in the West Bank, Hamas has taken over Gaza in a bloody coup, and rockets fall almost daily on Sderot and now also Ashkelon.

But that's missing the point, many

Israelis would say. The point is – we have survived, prospered. The IDF is the strongest military in the Middle East, the economy is booming, the restaurants in Tel Aviv have never been better and life is good. Even if our democracy is not perfect, it's a work in progress and as for peace – well, it's because the Muslim world has refused to accept our presence.

We're an old people, but a young nation – give us a little time and it'll all work out. After all, we're the only democracy in the Middle East. Give us a break.

All is well and good, and most of it even true. But the argument rests on an assumption that things are moving in the right direction, and here Avishai begs to differ. And he is not one to mince words: "If democracies can be said to age gracefully, Israel's has not," he writes, and continues to point out that "its essential segregated nature has only become more extreme over the last 60 years." This is not new territory for Avishai, who in his book "The Tragedy of Zionism," from the mid-80's, lamented how Israel had turned out a lot less liberal and more religious and racist than the founders had envisioned.

A large part of "The Hebrew Republic" book is dedicated to the myriad of areas and means of discrimination in Israel that makes life exceedingly difficult for the Israeli Arabs. He writes in excruciating detail how much less the Israeli state spends on Arab cities and villages than on Jewish municipalities, how they are disadvantaged by not being in the army, how it's all but impossible for them to buy land in many areas and cities, and so on.

The lack of integration between Jews and Arabs in Israeli society, and Israel's attempt to sever all links to the Palestinian territories is a political problem, but for Avishai the economist, it's also a terrible waste of human potential and economic opportunity. And this is really his main point, highlighting as it does what may be the greatest contradiction in Israel today: That on the one hand it is such an incredibly modern country, prospering in the

globalized economy to a degree most other nations can only dream of, exporting high tech and bio-tech and becoming more and more a knowledge economy. At the same time, however, Israel remains trapped in a tribal mindset, and in a conflict over something as old-fashioned as land, an almost pre-modern zero-sum conflict in which one part's gain is seen as the other part's loss.

Even stranger is that so many Israelis completely discount the model staring them in the eye: The EU, what Avishai calls the "Israeli center's forbidden fruit." The EU is perhaps the world's most successful international organization, which has made war between Germany and France all but unthinkable and acted as a democratic magnet for the entire continent for more than half a century. An amazing success and model for cooperation between bitter enemies, and yet I cannot count the number of times I've been told by Israelis that the EU lives in a fantasy world and simply does not grasp the challenges of the Middle East.

Refusing to face reality

But for Avishai, it's the other way around. It's Israel that refuses to face reality and fully accept that it's connected to the rest of the world. It needs investment, trade and people from outside and while it's true that the economy has been doing very well in the last decade, it is not true when Likud leader Benjamin Netanyahu and others say the economy has disengaged from the conflict. Even – and perhaps especially – in a knowledge economy, it is crucial to be able to attract the brightest heads and the best talent. To use urban studies theorist Richard Florida's terminology, Israel must be able to attract and hold the creative class, and having rockets fall in your backyard – or living in a discriminating society – is simply not a great selling point. And as he does in the rest of the book, Avishai of course has the numbers to prove his point.

According to a recent poll, nearly half of all young Israelis "do not feel connected" to the country, a quarter of them do not see a future for themselves here and a whopping 44 percent "would think seriously about moving" if it would mean a better standard of living. Not exactly the kind of numbers the Zionist pioneers dreamed of, and something that must be reversed in the coming years if Israel is to have a future.

But how? That is the question. Avishai pins his hope on the entrepreneurial class, the very people behind the economic miracle in Israel, who according to him are realizing that even if the mighty IDF can keep the enemies at bay forever, both they and the country need normalcy and peace to prosper. So his hope is that Israel will come to its senses and an unholy alliance between the old left-wing peaceniks and the hyper-capitalist venture-fund managers and innovators will bring about "the Hebrew republic" and "bring peace to Israel at last."

Avishai ends the book on a hopeful note, with a spirited debate about the future of Israel among his students, but he is clearly worried, that time is running out but Israelis are too busy having a good time in Tel Aviv to notice. Sooner or later the military might of the IDF will erode. Meanwhile the ever-increasing settlements make peace more difficult every day and the continuing violence and the constant IDF "incurSIONS" builds up more hate and extremism among the Palestinians. It's a vicious spiral that must be broken. An obvious but extremely important point, and one Israel needs to hear. And since Israel normally refuses to listen to outsiders, I hope Avishai will get its attention.

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