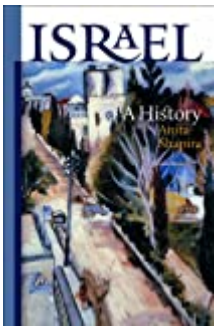
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Anita Shapira. *Israel: A History.* The Schusterman Series in Israel Studies. Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2012. 528 pp. $35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-61168-352-3.

Reviewed by Shlomo Aronson (Hebrew University of Jerusalem)

Published on H-Judaic (March, 2013)

Commissioned by Jason Kalman (Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion)

An Incomplete History of Israel

This book begins with the social-political-cultural birth of Zionism in Europe, and continues with its role in Palestine and almost to the present. It discusses two important dimensions of Zionist and Israeli history along with the authorâs straightforward historiography: Israelâs economic and cultural history (mainly literature and poetry). Unfortunately, the book offers little explanation or insight concerning Israeli politics, the ongoing crisis of political and social divisions, or Israelâs transition from a renowned success story to a controversial one in the eyes of many at home and abroad. As such, the book remains incomplete in certain vital areas, including the intellectual history of Zionism, Israelâs wars, domestic politics, and foreign affairs.

The book is largely based on secondary, well-known literature available in English, such as David Vitalsâs *The Origins of Zionism* (1980) and Anita Shapiraâs own publications. She does not refer to her most controversial work that compared Israelâs polity under David Ben-Gurion to a âguided democracyâ ruled by an Israeli version of Indonesiaâs Ahmed Sukarno or Ghanaâs Quame Nkrumah.[1] The choice of Shapiraâs secondary sources is arbitrary. She omits major works, such as Yoseph Hellerâs *Israel and the Cold War from the War of Independence to the Six Day War: The United States, The Soviet Union, The Arab-Israeli Conflict and Soviet Jewry* (2010). Shapiraâs methodology is narrowly descriptive and lacks both an analytical or comparative approach based on related historical knowledge. Additionally no archival research has been undertaken, thus relevant primary sources are also overlooked.

Every analysis of historical phenomena, such as Zionism, must begin with the timeframe in which it evolved, which in this case were the crises in traditional Judaism starting in the eighteenth century, and not just the changing sociopolitical environments that Shapira describes. Judaism succeeded in preserving its medieval substance while other civilizations developed modern forms that included theories of government, new institutions, secular values, philosophies, and sciences. Judaism, however, experienced the birth of Hassidism, not mentioned by Shapira, whose mystics are still venerated,

traditions worshipped, and rift with rabbinical Judaism still existent. Both perspectives (rabbinical and Hassidic) are needed in order to understand Jewish behavioral traits in modern Israel, as well as the structure and content of traditional Jewish education, family life, and the search to alter them that began with the Jewish Enlightenment. The crisis in traditional Judaism in eastern Europe, however, drove many Jews to an intellectual abyss and the birth of the *talush* (the alienated), who removed themselves from tradition but found no meaningful outlet outside it. This was a recurrent theme in the works of major writers, such as Uri Nissan Gnessin, Yoseph Chaim Brenner, and perhaps Franz Kafka. More than a few discovered Theodor Herzlâs political Zionism in a process in which a key role was played first by Baruch Benedict Spinoza and his criticism of the Jewish religion (but not to the abandonment of Judaismâs moral values), and later by Micha Josef Berdichevsky. The first goes unmentioned in this book, and the second is poorly represented, alongside Ahad Haâam, a disciple of Herbert Spencer. Ahad Haâam combined Spencerâs optimistic social Darwinism with Jewish national spiritual values. Yet his philosophy was rejected in favor of Berdichevskyâs criticism of Jewish Diaspora life that declared it pretentious but dying, and postulated the free will of individuals who are capable of liberating themselves as a matter of cultural-political survival. Here Friedrich Nietzscheâs ontology based on the individualâs âwill to powerâ was adopted through Berdichevskyâs mediation, but without its aristocratic, antidemocratic traits that later became one of the sources of Far Right Zionism. A double-edged syndrome emerged, explaining much of the energy and motivation of Israelâs founding fathers and their criticism of Jewish traditions and ways of life. In positive terms, the issues were: how could one retain Jewish identity without an abiding religious faith, which values could be extracted from historical Judaism and what were their foundations? âFree willâ produced an amazing admixture of the past before the past, that is, the revival of the Hebrew language and return to the homeland and to the book of books, values of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, including progressive ideas influenced by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and nineteenth-century social democracy interwoven with the universal values of the biblical prophets, all of which combined to produce an individual decision to transform modern Jewish existence into reality in Palestine. Later this could be described as the arbitrary product of a context that was over before the necessary institutions, rules of conduct, and theory of government, all of which were missing in historical Judaism, had time to fully develop in Palestine. Unfortunately, much of this is bypassed in Shapiraâs presentation.

Moving from the philosophical foundations of secular Zionism to Ottoman Palestine and World War I, Shapiraâs narrative skips over the fact that this period, when it was active on the ground until the outbreak of the Great War, was very short. The war brought with it the âSmall Holocaustâ of the Jews in Russia, the Bolshevik Revolution, and serious threats and setbacks to the tiny Zionist enterprise in Palestine. For all practical purposes, the Balfour Declaration of November 1917 was issued too early, or too late, to allow a smooth process of nation building, while the interwar years produced new forms of Zionism that reflected ideas on the Far Right and the sentiments prevalent in Europe that were adapted to a certain degree by Zeâev Jabotinsky and others, who at first identified with Benito Mussoliniâs Fascism. The Social Democrats concentrated on unique cooperative endeavors, such as the kibbutzim, but the battle between Left and Right continued to rage until the Holocaust and World War II, leaving in its wake scars that have still not healed. However, in this work the ensuing legacies and myths of the Right are barely touched on in the relevant timeframes.

The Holocaust and the Yishuvâs response to it are discussed in the book but but only after the fact. The Yishuvâs reactions while the Holocaust was occurring are not treated. Many elements in the legacy of Jabotinsky (died in 1940) who ordered his followers in the Irgun (the IZL) to fight the Nazis, not the British, were rejected or partially adopted by Menachem Begin: in 1937, the British Peel Commission Report recommended the partition of Western Palestine, while Jabotinsky claimed that both sides of the Jordan River constituted the Jewish Homeland and should be obtained by force if necessary. The two pivotal events (the Holocaust and Beginâs ârevoltâ against the British) created an ideological-historical syndrome that colors Israeli security policies to this day. Combined with religious-nationalist ideologies and an inherent sense of ethnic discrimination toward the mass immigration of Jews from Islamic countries to the State of Israel by the pragmatic European social democratic elite, this syndrome predated the Holocaust in part but assumed a distinct political, territorial, and strategic significance related to the Holocaust and its ostensible lessons during the May 1967 crisis, in the post-Six-Day War period, and in the Yom Kippur War until today.

Following the lead of the militant, quasi-Fascist Stern Group, the IZLâs commander, Begin, as Jabotinskyâs

self-appointed heir, declared his ârevoltâ against Britain. This was rationalized on the basis of Britainâs closure of the gates of Palestine to Adolf Hitlerâs refugees before and during World War II due to Arab military and political pressure, and was touted as the proper answer to British policy and a model for future actions. However, since it was the Nazis who actually shut off Jewish immigration from occupied Europe at the beginning of the âFinal Solutionâ in 1941, Beginâs rebellion was pointless and, from the political point of view, extremely damaging. This was especially true when Begin and the Stern Gang accused the Yishuv leadership of failing to rescue the Jews of Europe regardless of the fact that any rescue effort undertaken by this leadership was doomed. The Allies perceived Jewish efforts as threats to or interference with their own interests and priorities, so that these efforts merely boomeranged against the rescuers, while the Nazis retained complete control over the victims. Later, the partition of the country became a political necessity, not only to gain a crucial international consensus that would pave the way to Israelâs birth but also because the Holocaust had destroyed most of the millions who were supposed to have joined the Zionist vanguard in unpartitioned Western Palestine. Be that as it may, the rejection of partition was shared by Ahdut Haâavoda, the nationalist left wing of the Zionist Labor Movement under the leadership of Yitzhak Tabenkin. This was a group from whose ranks came a number of highly influential military and political leaders, such as Yigal Allon (whose biography was published by Shapira) and Yitzhak Rabin. They would play an important role toward the Six-Day War and its ramifications.

As described by the author in a chapter dealing with Beginâs ascendancy as prime minister, the Holocaust was a center piece of his government. Yet her narrative misses the vitriolic, moralistic, and territorial-political significance of his onslaught against the Labor leadership during the Holocaust and afterward, coined in terms of a conspiracy. Begin accused the mainstream Zionists of negligence and collaboration with the British in order to maintain their political control over the Yishuv. His ârevolt,â he argued, would have facilitated the rescue of Jews by enabling them to immigrate to Palestine in the middle of World War II, and allow the establishment of Jewish statehood in the territory that he and his movement cherished–both sides of the Jordan River. Beginâs vision, however, was totally detached from reality. Later, he pruned his territorial claims to Western Palestine alone. Yet the notion of Zionist ânegligenceâ and collaboration with Britain and the Nazis during the Holocaust, as allegedly proven after the war, became an ongoing ideological, political, and security-related weapon in the arsenal of the Likud Bloc, and various religious-nationalist groups couch their current criticism of territorial concessions to the Arabs in terms reminiscent of Beginâs ârevoltâ and the Holocaust.

The acquisition of an unconventional deterrent, i.e., the pursuit of the atomic bomb, was one of Ben-Gurionâs lessons from the Holocaust and the 1948 War of Independence, and became his quest beginning in 1949. Although this is a major domestic and foreign political issue, and one discussed in the relevant volumes of the *Foreign Relations of the United States* and other archival sources at much length, Shapira devotes two lines to it in her narrative. Ben-Gurionâs relentless pursuit of an alliance with France in order to obtain a French nuclear reactor (which would be built near Dimona in the Negev) ahead of the 1956 Suez-Sinai Campaign is surprisingly absent in the text. The related story of American-Israeli relations and Washingtonâs ceaseless efforts to curb the project, as part of its anti-proliferation crusade until 1969, are also missing, as is President Richard Nixonâs decision to accept Israelâs nuclear capability provided it remained undeclared.

Shapira maintains that Ben-Gurionâs main sources of legitimacy for the Jewish state were the Bible, and the territorial significance thereof, and the Holocaust, justifying the survivorsâ quest for sovereignty and security. The issue is more complex than she presents, since Ben Gurionâs leadership entailed several, not just one, interpretations of his goals as understood by Shapira. Although he did attach a major significance to the Bible, he simultaneously warned against drawing any actual political and territorial conclusions from it. The Holocaust, like previous disasters, should not overshadow the present and the future, including the vital economic and military aid rendered by West Germany. Yet the link between Ben-Gurionâs Germany policy and opposition to it from both the political Right and Left, isolated Ben-Gurion in the Center and made him the target of the politicization of the Holocaust. Thanks to the parliamentary Left, Begin was able to emerge from the political sidelines where he had been consigned ever since the misfired ârevoltâ of 1944 and his public campaign against the Reparations Agreement with West Germany because of his threats to use force in order to prevent its adoption by the Knesset.

Shapiraâs discussion of Ben-Gurionâs behavior ahead of the 1956 Suez-Sinai Campaign and his role ahead of the Eichmann Trial is detached from primary sources.

Similarly, the authorâs treatment of the âLavon Affairâ–a public scandal in the early 1960s that contributed to the demise of Ben-Gurion–overlooks Ben-Gurionâs pursuit of constitutional reform along British lines, and his quest for spiritual content for a nascent society consisting of a diversity of tradition-based immigrants from Muslim countries. Accused of âstatism,â i.e., the transformation of the state and its institutions into supreme values, Ben-Gurion found himself assailed by his political enemies and so-called spiritual leaders, mostly Hebrew University professors. Some opposed the nuclear project, while others feared it would lead to confrontation with the United States and Soviet Union. Others excoriated the government for its further connection with West Germany, while still others, such as the historian Jacob Leib Talmon (a specialist in the French Revolution and Maximilien Robespierreâs terror), harnessed their expertise in order to head a public crusade against the founding father. Talmonâs main concern was aimed at Ben-Gurionâs adoption in the late 1950s of a âmessianic vision,â or dream, which was supposed to give traditional Jews, now a majority in a partitioned Palestine, a sense of mission and some substance related to their religious past. But this was not a political program. It was a cultural vision, not connected in any way to political issues, as the historian Israel Kolatt has pointed out. For Talmon âpolitical messianismâ was the root of modern totalitarian democracies, all the way back to Robespierre. Shapira attached to Talmonâs anti Ben-Gurion crusade the term âTotalitarian Democracyâ when, accordingly, Ben-Gurion was trying to assume the role of a prophet, on top of his role as a blood and flesh politician. About this, both Talmon and Shapira were factually wrong. And on top of this, as long as Ben Gurion was in power, most traditional Israelis supported him. Shapira avoids Ben-Gurionâs struggles for parliamentary reform and for majority constituency ballot law, which would have given better representation to the non-Ashkenazi, in his opposition to the multiparty regime inherited from the prestate period. However, in this period, the âprofessorsâ came out victorious, undermining Ben-Gurionâs position and contributing to the ensuing vIacuum in the center of Israelâs polity that was filled in due course by the nationalist Right. This reflected the traditional Jewish behavior that Ben-Gurionâs state was supposed to rise above. The reform of the multiparty system and adoption of British ârules of the political gameâ have remained unfulfilled until today. The strong, anarchic instincts of the Jews, as Ben-Gurion defined them, would receive political expression in the 1960s.

Ben-Gurion was forced to resign in the summer of 1963. Levi Eshkol, his successor, found himself captivated by a âfirst strike,â or preventive war, the conventional military doctrine propounded by Allon (and Rabin), Eshkolâs domestic political ally, as a conventional alternative to Ben-Gurionâs security doctrine. Shapira makes no mention of the road to the preventive war of 1967 and its domestic and foreign political ramifications in light of the perspective gained since. More attention to recent scholarship could have allowed for its inclusion. The issue of Israeli control over the West Bank (and Gaza) as a result of the 1967 war was decided on by the grand coalition created by Eshkol that included Begin, and thus became an issue of political contention and ideological dispute partially in response to the Arab positions and partially a result of the coalitionâs dysfunction and its membersâ political and generational differences. Also missing in the book is the Shakespearian drama of Ben-Gurionâs (an opposition leader at the time) potential return to the defense ministry, and the decision of his protÃ©gÃ©es, Moshe Dayan and Shimon Peres, to desert him in order to enhance their own careers in the grand coalition and because of their concern over his possible refusal to preempt, and later occupy and retain, the Arab-populated West Bank.

The authorâs discussion of the Yom Kippur War and its ramifications is scanty and misses the crucial change in Israeli society. Shapira concentrates on the shocked Ashkenazi elite, without an in-depth analysis of the non-Ashkenazi majority. However, the so-called Mizrahim, traditional Israelis neglected by Eshkolâs and Golda Meirâs political and economic machine rule, were ripe to move away from Labor to the Right. The elite itself was divided as a result of the war and its enormous casualties, combined with other phenomena–ethnic background, creed, class, generation, and income group–that began to appear as rents in the fabric of Israeli society. As the dream of an egalitarian society faded, human values showed signs of corruption in both Western and oriental forms. The individual was more concerned with his personal welfare than with the collective good. This led to a new mood of self-criticism, unfamiliar to those accustomed to Israelâs success story. Most refused, however, to pay the price of appeasing the Arab Moloch. The blame was not Israelâs solely, nor was all the intransigence, according to the British ambassador in Tel Aviv. Yet a myth emerged, that still exists, to wit, that Meir rebuffed President Anwar Sadatâs alleged peace offers on the eve of the Yom Kippur War, as her political enemies and some of todayâs Israeli historians claim. But this is not dealt with

in this book by means of primary archival material. The Arabsâ decision to launch a limited offensive against a nuclear-armed Israel received Soviet backing, inter alia, as compensation for Jewish immigration to Israel from the USSR (one of the byproducts of the dÃ©tente). Egypt and Syria employed Israelâs own conventional military doctrine to inflict heavy casualties on the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), thus shattering Israelâs self-confidence (a trauma still felt forty years later). The Israeli government and public did not understand the enemyâs motives and limited goals. The Arab onslaught was described by some ministers and the opposition leader, Begin, as a war of destruction, as many believed but which it was not. The Left argued, as they do today, that it could have been avoided if only Meir and Defense Minister Dayan had listened to Sadatâs peace proposals, which however were unacceptable to any Israel government, and finally given up by him in 1979 when President Jimmy Carter dictated a peace treaty to Sadat (now being put to the test by the recently instated Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt). The old elite, already divorced from the masses because of their sense of discrimination at its hands, saw its power bases increasingly shifting to Beginâs Likud, finally bringing him to power in 1977. Instead of the old, secular elite, a religious alternative offered itself among the settlers in the West Bank and Gaza, justifying settlements in Holocaust- and 1973-related terms that alienated many Israelis.

The details of the Camp David Accords, which preceded the Israeli-Egyptian Peace Treaty of 1979, as described by the author are properly summarized, but not analyzed in terms of their long-range validity, especially when based on a staged peace process whose final results were supposed to be negotiated in the future. The same is true with regard to the Israeli-Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) Oslo Peace Accord negotiated by Foreign Minister Peresâs aides and adopted by the prime minister, Rabin, under the unique circumstances of the First Gulf War. Shortly thereafter, Rabin was assassinated by a religious fanatic.

The immediate rise of Hamas and its suicide bombers, and Yasser Arafatâs Second Intifada that replaced negotiations on core issues, such as boundaries, Jerusalem, and mainly the Palestinian refugeesâ âRight of Returnâ to Israel proper, combined to drive many Israelis to despair over the chances of ever attaining peace and to see the future in terms of an impending doom. The âotherâ camp is motivated by religious and nationalistic beliefs and sectoral interests that have little in common with the old elite. Yet among the post-Zionist youth, some see no way out, while others feel so alienated that they seek salvation in the Diaspora. A new-old *talush* has found refuge at home and abroad, mainly in the United States, London, and Berlin, of all places.

The criticism of Likud governments and its allies among the religious parties, which happened to command a persistent majority among Israelis in the period covered in Shapiraâs last chapters, is voiced by Israeli writers, Left parties, and a great number of intellectuals, and is based on liberal-universal values, some that could be described as multicultural. Yet the sociologist Nissim Mizrahi has argued in an online discussion that those very liberal values lead most Mizrahim to cling to their sociocultural values even more. As a matter of identity, they reject such ideas as equality to Arabs under law, which is interpreted by liberal courts rather than enacted by the parliamentary majority. The rights of Arabs are emphasized by liberals rather than their duties to a âJewish Democratic State.â Peace has not proved itself to be a self-sustaining solution to the Palestinian-Jewish conflict, and its failure to materialize was not because of Israelâs refusal to make peace, but because of the daydreams of the liberals. This can be described as a strong, very influential conservative syndrome, magnified by the multiparty system which gives it several political outlets that dominate the Likudâs coalitions. The inquiry into the historical roots of this reality is almost entirely absent from Shapiraâs work.

Readers interested in the pre-state roots of Israelâs foreign policy and wars, in their connection to Israelâs domestic polity, and in the evolution of this polity from the demise of Ben-Gurionâs rule until Netanyahuâs third coalition of 2013 will be disappointed with this book.

Note

[1]. Anita Shapira, *Mi-piturei ha-rama ad peruq ha-palmah: Sugiyot ba-ma'avaq al ha-hanhaga ha-bit'honit* [From the dismissal of the chief of national staff to the dissolving of the palmach: Issues in the struggles over defense leadership] (Tel Aviv: HaKibbutz hameuchad, 1984).

Citation: Shlomo Aronson. Review of Shapira, Anita, *Israel: A History*. H-Judaic, H-Net Reviews. March, 2013.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=37141