



Israel: A Concise History of a Nation Reborn

Daniel Gordis

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Winner of the Jewish Book of the Year Award

The first comprehensive yet accessible history of the state of Israel from its inception to present day, from Daniel Gordis, "one of the most respected Israel analysts" (*The Forward*) living and writing in Jerusalem.

Israel is a tiny state, and yet it has captured the world's attention, aroused its imagination, and lately, been the object of its opprobrium. Why does such a small country speak to so many global concerns? More pressingly: Why does Israel make the decisions it does? And what lies in its future?

We cannot answer these questions until we understand Israel's people and the questions and conflicts, the hopes and desires, that have animated their conversations and actions. Though Israel's history is rife with conflict, these conflicts do not fully communicate the spirit of Israel and its people: they give short shrift to the dream that gave birth to the state, and to the vision for the Jewish people that was at its core. Guiding us through the milestones of Israeli history, Gordis relays the drama of the Jewish people's story and the creation of the state. Clear-eyed and erudite, he illustrates how Israel became a cultural, economic and military powerhouse—but also explains where Israel made grave mistakes and traces the long history of Israel's deepening isolation.

With *Israel*, public intellectual Daniel Gordis offers us a brief but thorough account of the cultural, economic, and political history of this complex nation, from its beginnings to the present. Accessible, levelheaded, and rigorous, *Israel* sheds light on the Israel's past so we can understand its future. The result is a vivid portrait of a people, and a nation, reborn.

Israel: A Concise History of a Nation Reborn Details

Date : Published October 18th 2016 by Ecco

ISBN :

Author : Daniel Gordis

Format : Kindle Edition 581 pages

Genre : History, Nonfiction, Cultural, Israel, Politics, Audiobook, Historical

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From Reader Review Israel: A Concise History of a Nation Reborn for online ebook

Michael Neiberg says

It is readable, but not very balanced. It's more a series of stories and episodes from Israel's past than an actual history. The Israeli-Arab community is completely absent. At some points, it's obvious he is not an actual historian. He discusses the Gush Etzion massacre before Deir Yassin in the book, which is wrong - and quite consequential. It's a decent introduction for those who do not know much about Israel's history, but it should be a first step only to draw the basic outlines.

Adam Hummel says

Wish I could give it 10 out of 5 stars. Cannot say enough good things about this book. Insightful, great history, meaningful, well-written. Incredible volume to add to the already amazing library out there of books on Israeli history. Another brilliant book by Daniel Gordis.

Igor Putina says

Great book. Easy to listen, interesting and well written!

Scott says

My life-long fascination and love of Israel was amplified by visiting in November. Anyone following along on my wall saw the pictures, poem and thoughts I expressed about the trip.

I remember crying for joy as a young teen when I heard about the Camp David Peace Accords. I was more devastated by the horrible assassination of Yitzhak Rabin than I was by the election of Donald Trump. Both events had frightening implications for the two countries I love the most.

But I am a J-Street Jew. I believe in questioning Israel's leadership, which I find in its current form to be extremist, anti-peace (but less so than the Palestinian leadership) and the greatest threat to Israel's long-term security. The ultra orthodox in Israel are a tremendous drag on the economy there. And the settler movements' racist, absolutist, violent, and zealous hold on the Israeli government is a stain on the creation of the likes of Herzl, Ha'am, Ben-Gurion, Dayan, Rabin, and countless others.

Having just completed reading Daniel Gordis's "Israel, A Concise History of a Nation Reborn," my love for Israel is stronger, as is my appreciation for the Israeli perspectives. My fear for the country might also be more substantial, largely based on some of what I mentioned above.

Gordis, who Wikipedia says was a more liberal Jew who has shifted to be slightly right of center, does a masterful job of laying out Israel's history, and the place of Jews in and on the land. He is balanced in his

portrayal, but the pro-Israel leanings that naturally surface at times appear reasonable for the most part.

While Gordis is a bit too slanted when he discusses the Iranian nuclear deal (How about citing all the experts in Israel and the world who supported the deal, instead of focusing on Henry Kissinger and George Schultz?), only hints at the threats of the settler movement to peace and the ultra orthodox to the economy, and offers little on the current extremism of the Netanyahu government, overall he has accomplished something remarkable and of long-lasting value in his book. For a more balanced portrayal of the most recent decade, you will have to look elsewhere. Well worth the read, no matter the weaknesses on current events.

Amrit Pal says

Danny Gordis is eloquent, polarizing, and weaves threads from Israel's complicated history in a coherent fashion. My uneducated admiration of the country comes from friends and family. After reading this book, I better understand the difference of opinion between European Jewry, American Jewry and the nation state of Israel.

Joe says

Interesting book showing the birth pains this rebirth of the nation has gone through. So many things that are quite amazing like the immigration of huge numbers of people.

It also shows the damed if you do damed if you don't situation that Israelis find themselves in. Wanting peace with their neighbors and if they give in not finding it. Giving up west bank only to find new war and terrorism coming down on them. The Oslo accord is an example of this that utterly failed from Israeli perspective.

This little nation the size of NJ has contributed in a huge way to the rest of the world yet gets no credit.

Another amazing thing is how of all the horrible nations in the world at the UN only Israel had been sanctioned by the UN at certain times. Even when Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Cuba massacred thousands of their own.

Rodney Harvill says

This book covers the history of Israel from the beginning of the Zionist movement in the late 1890's to 2016, when it was published. Even for a small nation like Israel, a century of history is a lot of ground to cover; hence the book is a high-level survey of the relevant history. A few high points I noticed include:

- The Zionist movement was prompted by rising anti-Semitism in Europe, especially in western Europe. As centuries-old restrictions on occupations were removed, Jews had been entering new fields and excelling, often outperforming their non-Jewish colleagues and arousing envy. Furthermore, those engaging in violence

against the Jews in pogroms often called on them to go back to their homeland. The Zionists got the message and concluded that the only way to truly be safe in the world was to have a Jewish homeland where Jews would make and enforce the laws.

- In 1903, there was a violent pogrom in Kishinev, Russia that claimed the lives of four dozen Jews. In the wake of this pogrom, Jewish poet Chaim Bialik wrote “In the City of Slaughter,” condemning both the violent persecutors as well as the Jews themselves for cowering in their basements while their families were brutalized. It was time for a new Jew who would no longer tolerate being abused. Interestingly enough, Kishinev may have cast a longer shadow than did the Holocaust, for it merely validated the lessons already learned at Kishinev.
- While some Zionists worked towards formation of a Jewish homeland, the vision and diligent efforts of Eliezer Ben Yehuda restored Hebrew to the status of a spoken language, believing that a Jewish homeland needed its own Jewish language. Interestingly enough, he ran into resistance from Orthodox Jews, who thought he was profaning a sacred language. I find this absolutely stunning. When the Old Testament scriptures were written, Hebrew was a spoken language, covering every aspect of life, from the sacred to the profane. How did these Orthodox Jews fail to see this?
- The Zionist movement prompted a series of Aliyot (plural of Aliyah), waves of Jewish immigration into Palestine, both before and after World War I. In the wake of the Balfour declaration and the formation of the British Mandate after World War I, the British initially encouraged Jewish immigration into Palestine but then restricted it in an effort to appease Arab opposition. These restrictions proved to be an obstacle for Jews fleeing Germany between Hitler’s rise to power and the outbreak of World War II. Many Jews attempting to immigrate to Palestine were forced to return to Europe to face death in Hitler’s concentration camps. After World War II, these restrictions remained in place, and Holocaust survivors attempting to immigrate found themselves locked up behind the barbed wire fences around internment camps.
- Starting in the 1920’s Arabs in Palestine started resorting to violence against Jews in an effort to drive them out. The ad hoc defense forces formed up for self defense would go on to be the core of the armed forces Israel fielded in its 1948 Independence War.
- During the Independence War, many Arabs in Palestine left their homes or were forced to leave. Simultaneously, a similar number of Jews in Arab nations such as Egypt, Syria, Iraq, etc., were driven out, forced to leave their homes and worldly possessions behind. Israel, lacking the resources to care for them, welcomed them. The Arab nations turned the Palestinian Arabs into permanent refugees.
- The 1967 Six Day War was prompted a military mobilization and buildup by Israel’s neighbors, coupled with bellicose rhetoric about driving the Jews into the sea. Severely outnumbered, Israel recognized that it could not afford to let its enemies choose the time and place of battle and decided to launch a surprise attack that decimated enemy air forces and gained for Israel air superiority. As the primary threat was from Egypt, along with the need to reopen the Straits of Tiran, which Egypt had closed in violation of international law, Israel initially focused its efforts in the Sinai but soon recognized an opportunity to deal with other issues. For example, the Golan Heights had been used as high ground to periodically bombard Galilee. Furthermore, all Jewish holy sites were under Jordanian control in East Jerusalem and the West Bank. Since Israel was now at war with Syria and Jordan, there was a golden opportunity to gain control of these territories, and Israel took advantage of it.
- After its overwhelming victory in the Six Day War, Israel became overconfident in its ability to defeat its enemies. This period of overconfidence, the conceptzia, ended with the surprise attack by Syria and Egypt on Yom Kippur in 1973. In the end, Israel was victorious in its third existential war in twenty-five years.
- Because the Palestinians began using southern Lebanon as a base of operations from which they could fire rockets into Galilee, Israel decided to invade and occupy part of Lebanon to stop the rockets. I had wrongly assumed that being caught by surprise in the Yom Kippur War had made Israel more reactive to provocations. Instead, these rocket attacks were causing Israelis to have to sleep in their basements and in shelters. Israel hadn’t come as far as it had for its people to have to cower in their basements as at Kishinev, and the prime minister decided to take decisive action.

- In deciding who qualified as sufficiently Jewish to be eligible for citizenship, Israel abandoned the traditional criterion of having a Jewish mother and followed the lead of the Nuremberg laws. If a person was Jewish enough to be hunted down by the Nazis, he was Jewish enough to be an Israeli citizen. Not surprisingly, Jews came to Israel from all over the world and brought with them the values of their places of origin. Not surprisingly, this has produced conflict, but it is also a part of their Israeli identity.
- In its conflicts with its neighbors and with Palestinian terrorists, Israel has sometimes overreacted. The author acknowledges this and also points out that such overreactions tend to provoke soul searching in Israel and lead to changes in how Israelis wage war. What he finds frustrating, though, is that the world tends to spotlight Israel's overreactions to a provocation and completely ignore the provocation, typically an act of terrorism, that led to the overreaction. One such incident occurred in 1953. A group of Palestinian infiltrators lobbed a grenade into an apartment in the middle of the night, killing a mother and two of her young children as they slept in their beds. In response, Israeli troops demolished Qibya, a West Bank border village, killing 50-60 inhabitants and provoking an international outcry over the reprisal but not over the Israelis killed in their sleep. The author and other Israelis tend to see such asymmetric international responses as the latest manifestation of Jew-hatred, and I am inclined to agree with him. No provocation, no response. If the provocations stop, so will the reprisals.

My review barely scratches the surface. The book is very informative and well written.

Peter says

While the word 'concise' in the title may be a marketing ploy, Gordis touches all the necessary basis in a very readable style and easy to follow format, which means this the perfect book for an overview of the founding and first seven decades of Israel's existence.

Sharon says

I wanted to understand the situation in Israel better and this book was great. It's a great history of the area, well written and very easy to read.

Melissa says

After I read *The Way to the Spring: Life and Death in Palestine* late last year, I promised myself and any of my review-readers that I would read something more sympathetic to Israel, so that's why I read this. I'm very glad I did even though it really didn't help me to work my way through my feelings about the conflicts between Israel and its neighbors. I'm Jewish by the Nazi/Israel definition of the word and I think I undeniably would have supported the creation of the state of Israel when it began and I also find a lot that Israel has accomplished to be inspiring and it really does fill me with pride for the amazingness of the Jewish people throughout time.

That said, I cannot forget the other book I read. It was very upsetting to learn about the horrific mistreatment of Palestinians at the hands of the IDF and the Jewish settlers. That is real, it's not just an anti-Semitic fantasy. But after reading this book I'm even less sure of what anyone should be doing about any of this. I

knew already from reading Bill Clinton's memoir years ago that Arafat had turned down a two-state agreement, and I learned from this book that Palestine has rejected many chances to have their own state next to Israel. Instead, they only want the end to the Jewish state altogether, and that cannot and should not happen. There is no doubt in my mind, especially after also having just read *Voodoo Histories: The Role of the Conspiracy Theory in Shaping Modern History*, that the refusal of the Arabs in the middle east to accept deals with Israel that forces them to recognize that Israel IS a country is not simply an anger about colonialism or a disliking of western values, but specifically about anti-Semitic conspiracy theories that seems to infect people and cause enormous harm repeatedly throughout history. And that makes me worry that there can never be peace.

Because this book failed to talk really at all about the kinds of things Israel does to Palestine every day, and instead focuses only on the losses Israel has, even when they're far fewer than the losses on the other side, I have to admit I find it untrustworthy. The author seems to really take pride in the IDF not trying to kill civilians, but the stories out of Palestine tell us otherwise, and also tells us that there are other ways to mistreat people besides killing them. For instance, you could spray "skunk" liquid on them, you can bulldoze their houses, you can arrest and torture them, you can force everyone to have a curfew, you can limit their mobility. Also, you can turn a blind eye to settlers moving into territories that are not theirs and then killing plenty of people (people interviewed in *The Way to the Spring* feared the settlers more than they feared the IDF) while technically being about to say their military doesn't routinely kill civilians.

Honestly, though, I'm not sure what anyone should do about any of it. I feel terrible for the Palestinians and I cannot stand them being killed, but I think their leadership has fucked them time and time again by refusing compromises mostly due to an anti-Semitic hatred for Israel. I used to think that Israel, as the stronger party, had all the responsibility to back off of their military incursions, and to really try to make a good faith peace, even if some Israelis get killed in the process. And I guess I still think that, but I'm less cocksure that shit would work. Now that I'm 34, I guess the last of my youthful idealism about human nature is gone, and now I think humans suck so bad that we'll fight this planet right into its early grave. Maybe the Christians are right about the Jews returning to their ancestral homeland signaling the start of the apocalypse and now we're ringing in the end times with trumpets (Trump/Pence). I almost wish that was the case because then all this shit would have been predetermined and decidedly less tragic.

Noah Goats says

The story of the foundation of modern Israel, from the first conception of Zionism by Theodor Herzl to the modern Jewish state, is a fascinating piece of history, and Daniel Gordis tells it very well. This is a great and highly readable book.

Gordis comes to the subject with a strong bias in favor of Israel, and he makes a good case for his point of view. (But then again, all my sympathies are with Israel to begin with.) Gordis doesn't shy away from the mistakes and even atrocities that have been committed in the creation of the state of Israel, but he always puts them in context and is careful to show them from each side's perspective.

It really is astonishing that 2,000 years after Titus destroyed the temple and scattered the Jews across the Empire their culture and sense of home was so powerful that they went back. Lots of people have been scattered and dislocated by history, only the Jews have maintained their identity so completely that they have come back home again after such a length of time. And it's also amazing how things came together, from the first spark of modern zionism, to Turkey losing control of Palestine, to the holocaust, and then a successful

war for independence against all their neighbors at once... the Jewish people can be excused for seeing a miracle in all this.

Of course, there is a messy side to all the glory, with the teeming shantytowns full of Palestinian refugees who have been stuck between Israel and the Arab world since the late 1940s and all the bitter fighting and terrorism that has flowed out of this situation... Israel is suffering from a number of sores that ooze to this day and will continue to do so for the foreseeable future.

Glen Stott says

This was a long book, filled with information – way more than I could possibly pass along in a review. Gordis begins his History in the mid to late 1800s. He describes the birth of Zionism and what it stood for. He follows various movements to create a Jewish state, not all of them focused on the Middle East – Argentina, for example, was seriously considered. Gordis carries through the impact of the disastrous WWI & WWII, though the impact of WWII was significantly greater. He describes, in detail, the political movements and changes as Israel has struggled through several wars and battled terrorism. Politically it has vacillated between the right (religious) and left (secular). He outlines the various international relationships that have waxed and waned through the seventy years Israel has existed. The book is highly informative and points out the successes and the painful lessons learned through mistakes made along the way.

In order to be as well informed as I can, I make it a habit to read different views on many subjects, including politics, science, history, etc. I try to read with an open mind to fairly evaluate what I read. This means I must also be willing to change my mind about any subject when new data or facts show me a change is appropriate. When I was younger, the need to change arose more often. At over seventy years old, I rarely read anything that requires a significant change. This book is an exception. I find I must change my mind about Israel in several ways.

I have always viewed Jews as God's first chosen people, along with my Christian belief that the Messiah will come, and they will finally recognize him. The Promised Land was given to them, but they lost it. In 1948, the United Nations gave part of Palestine to the Jews for their homeland. I have always thought the UN does not have the power to give a land to any people. That would be like giving California to Mexico, (which in today's world, sometimes seems like a good idea ?). So, while I have high hopes and best wishes for the Jewish people, I have felt they should not have taken Palestine and driven the Palestinians from their established homes and country.

As it turns out, I was uninformed and misinformed about what happened. When the Jews developed serious intentions of making Palestine the Jewish homeland in the 1800's, it was a sparsely populated land (mostly Arabs with some Jews) that was part of the Ottoman Empire (Turkey). In the 1880s, Jews began moving in with no resistance from Turkey. After World War I and the destruction of the Ottoman Empire, Great Britain took Palestine as a colony. To begin with, Great Britain welcomed the Jews. As the Jews immigrated into Palestine they set up governments and communities. When the Arabic countries of the Middle East realized Jews were becoming the majority they tried to flood in Arabs and complained to Great Britain. Great Britain bowed to the Arabic nations and turned on the Jews. It established annual immigration limits of Jews while Arabs were allowed to rush in. After the end of World War II, Great Britain was attempting to extricate itself from the Middle East. It was in this situation that the UN stepped in to establish Palestine as a homeland for the Jews. For centuries Palestine had not been a country, but a satellite of other countries. It was not filled

with an Arabic population with deep roots. Most of the Arabs and Jews were new arrivals that came in from the early part of the 20th century to the end of WWII. Israel was established as a democratic nation and the Jews were the majority, though in some areas Arabs did have significant representation. Ultimately, the Jews had to fight a revolutionary war to subdue Arabs who were unwilling to be governed by Jews. Most of the major Arabic countries fought against Israel. As Israel began to win the revolution, many of the Arabian Palestinians fled the country. Arabian countries refused to accept the refugees as citizens and kept them in refugee camps, where many are still today, along with their posterity. They don't want to go back to the country they left, a democratic Israel. Instead they want Israel destroyed and the Jews removed from power. In the revolution, Great Britain supported the Arabs, but when Israel demonstrated a willingness to use force of arms against Great Britain, the British decided this was not a war they wanted to get into. The United States was not willing to assist Israel in their revolution, so Israel purchased arms from Czechoslovakia with money donated by Jews from around the world. Based upon this information, I now believe Israel has a valid right to exist.

I have read other related books, "The New Middle East" by Shimon Perez (1993) for one, but none had nearly the depth of information in this book. Started 2018.03.18 - Finished 2018.03.31

Hal Schrieve says

This book covers a lot of ground in terms of the facts of Israel's statehood and is a good primer on what you are likely to hear about the history of Israel from a right-wing perspective. The facts it cites aren't flagrantly incorrect and in some sense it gives an outside reader a lot to think about in terms of the long history of arguments about Zionism within Israel and it will definitely tell a person more than a more general book on current struggles—it goes all the way back to the nineteenth century and the birth of Zionist thought.

However, I have beef with how this author writes history. Here are my two major criticisms of this book:

1. Gordis writes history as propaganda and leaves out facts that don't support his viewpoint/which depict people on his side in a bad light .

I appreciate that the majority of people looking to read this book support the existence of the state of Israel and frankly I am not sure that this is a problem. A historian can direct his book at a particular audience and even hold specific beliefs and state his argument for these beliefs in his work. However, Gordis does not limit himself to making reasoned arguments in favor of Israeli policy or arguing that his position is the correct one (as opposed to opponents'). Rather he behaves as if he is giving an unbiased history but leaves out details on the deaths of Palestinian civilians, the racism of early Zionists, and war crimes committed by Israeli soldiers in history and the present. These are deeply irresponsible things for even a propagandist to do, because it leaves him with an argument that only stands if one ignores the huge gaps. Gordis even uses adverbs and adjectives like "savage" to describe dissenting political groups within Israel, and doesn't present any of the various reasons Israeli Jews or Jews in the American diaspora might be uncomfortable with settlements or with the marginalization of Arabs within Israeli society or a whole host of issues. It is basically the same issue as reading a history of the Vietnam War which presents America as a just democratic nation fighting for freedom and creating prosperity—it isn't just biased, it completely obfuscates the historical picture and doesn't show the intelligent opponents of state policy. Fundamentally, Gordis doesn't seem to recognize that people who have materially suffered under the state of Israel might access his book or read it and be able to refute his blatant refusal to engage in discussion. This makes me uneasy. It is a

pity because I have heard good things about the religious works written by Gordis.

2. He only uses secondary sources.

While general purpose surveys of History are necessary for popular consumption, Gordis doesn't really add anything here. He is just picking and choosing from longer and more detailed narratives of different parts of Israeli history in order to craft a condensed narrative. I don't appreciate his brevity or how he selects his facts and I think this book would have more merit if he did any primary historical research at all.

Patrick Hackett says

There's so much about Israel that I didn't know prior to reading this book. I honestly only had a vague notion that the United Nations didn't just come together in 1948 and carve the boundaries of Israel like, "really sorry about the Holocaust and all of that antisemitism, here's a random spot in the Middle East for you!" That is very obviously not the case, but every time Israel/Palestine came up in the news or in conversation I felt super uneducated about the topic.

I really liked the beginning of the book and I learned *a ton* without being totally overwhelmed by the massive amount of history and background that could have been included. It really was a concise history! That said, at times the author's biases towards Israel were disappointingly blatant, especially as we reached modern times.

Overall I would recommend if you're trying to get a better understanding of the history of Israel. I have a much greater appreciation for how complicated the situation is and why people feel so strongly about the Jewish state, one way or the other. (3.5 stars.)

Lisa says

I took this book with me on my trip to Israel. While our secular Jewish guide drove us back to the cruise ship, I was able to ask him intelligent questions based on the book. I learned about the aliyahs, what the Orthodox Jews are truly like (I had no idea the men do not work and live off the government). I came to understand Zionism, the history of the wars and the land very well through this book and then it was all capped off being there. The author is not a very religious Jewish man, but I was able to see Biblical history through the guides we had on the 3 days we were there. The book is well-written, easy to read. The author does not get bogged down with details. I highly recommend reading this book before one goes to Israel. I had wished I had also been able to find a book about Israel that tied in more of the Bible but I did not find one so I just had this one.
