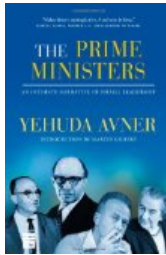




BOOK REVIEW BY PROF. GERALD M. STEINBERG: PRESENT AT ISRAEL'S RE-CREATION

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Yehuda Avner, *The Prime Ministers: An Intimate Narrative of Israeli Leadership*, Jerusalem, London, and New Milford, CT, USA: The Toby Press, LLC, 2010 (pp. 715)

Dean Acheson's memoir of the origins of the Cold War as seen from the top floor of the U.S. State Department (*Present at the Creation: My Years in the State Department*, NY, 1969) was and remains a classic text. Similarly, this memoir by Yehuda Avner is required reading for understanding the formative years of Israeli foreign policy and diplomacy.

Avner was "present at the creation", as speech writer, senior advisor, and confidant for four of Israel's prime ministers -Eshkol, Meir, Rabin and Begin - while they grappled with the immense complexities of guiding the newly restored Jewish nation-state. His ability to work with such a wide range of leaders, from both Labor and Likud also reflects Avner's own pragmatic approach to Israeli diplomacy and a much needed reminder of the limitations resulting from ideological blinders, both Left and Right.

This volume is also a personal memoir and a much needed reminder of the enormity of the challenges, sacrifices and seemingly impossible achievements of Israel's founding generation. Like others in the Diaspora who understood the fragility of collective Jewish existence, particularly after the Shoah, Avner left his family in Manchester to become a Jewish Palestinian, committed to restoring Jewish sovereignty after 2000 years in exile. As one of the founders of Kibbutz Lavi (with others from "the Left-leaning" religious Hapoel Mizרחי party), Avner and his friends "harvested rocks" to clear the land, dug latrines, and took up arms to repel the invading Arab armies. This is the essential context for the political and diplomatic events in which Avner participated, and chronicled with rare skill.

In 1959, Avner was hired as a "greenhorn" translator in the foreign ministry, during Golda Meir's tenure, and at the height of Ben Gurion's dominance of Israeli politics. Although not a member of the dominant Labor party machine, his intellect and skills compensated for the lack of political allegiance usually necessary for promotion. In 1963, he became an English-language speech writer for Eshkol, who became PM after Ben Gurion's abrupt resignation. When Eshkol and his successors traveled abroad, Avner was also their note-taker, confidant, becoming a senior advisor, and, later, Ambassador to Britain and Australia.

Although each leader featured in this volume had a particular view of the international and regional environment, and the policy options available to Israel, they shared a hard-core realism, with few expectations of assistance and understanding from the misnamed "international community". This realism meant an understanding that in international politics, power and interests, rather than ideals or moral commitments, usually determined policy. Outflanked by Arab oil power, Israel needed to tread carefully, finding allies where possible, and minimizing the dangers when out-gunned diplomatically.

This fragility came through in the story Avner tells regarding a speech he drafted for Eshkol's 1965 state-visit to London, in which the young advisor sought to "rebrand Israel" (using today's Foreign Ministry jargon) as a normal country, including references to cultural pluralism and "Tel Aviv high jinks". Eshkol rejected the draft, and scolded his aide: "Don't you understand we are still at war? We are still beleaguered. We still face terrorism. ♦ We are still absorbing hundreds of thousands of refugee immigrants. So how on earth can you expect us to be normal?" (p. 128)

In contrast to revisionist and polemic biographies, these memoirs include little speculative psychological or political analysis, and reflect respect and affection for the prime ministers that led the country during this period. As Avner emphasizes, all four leaders were fully dedicated to the

objectives of Zionism and to their public responsibilities. None could even be suspected of abusing the power and public trust for personal gain. Avner quotes a Begin supporter on the night of the 1977 election victory over Shimon Peres: "Begin never lined his pockets the way they have. He's humble and honest. Begin speaks like a Jew, the way a Jew should speak." (p. 348)

Removed from his iconic pedestal, the portraits of Yitzhak Rabin are human and credible, particularly as the former IDF chief of staff, transformed into an inexperienced ambassador to Washington who made mistakes but learned quickly. Avner served as counselor under Ambassador Rabin, who is described as "a conceptualizer with a highly structured and analytical mind." (p. 182)

In 1975, as Prime Minister, Rabin used these lessons in a complex diplomatic and psychological chess game with Henry Kissinger. Avner provides a detailed record of Kissinger's demands for premature concessions in what became the second Sinai disengagement agreement with Egypt, and Rabin's skill in turning a weak hand into long-term American commitments.

Although the primary focus is on foreign policy, the domestic political context is not ignored, reflecting Kissinger's exaggerated observation that Israel has no foreign policy, only domestic politics. In grappling with the American pressure, Rabin also had to contend with his rival, Shimon Peres, who was the defense minister, thereby reducing room for maneuver. During the tense cabinet meetings that preceded Israel's 1976 operation to rescue hijack hostages taken to Entebbe airport in Uganda, Rabin showed his impatience with Peres' pontifications. "The problem is his rhetoric is so persuasive he believes it himself." (p. 307) In contrast, the relationship between Rabin and Begin, as head of the Opposition at the time, was based on mutual respect, despite basic policy disagreements.

Foreign leaders and their interactions with their Israeli counterparts are also dissected in detail. In the three decades covered in this memoir, Avner reports on numerous instances in which Europeans, in particular, adopted a patronizing approach, covering petty political interests with lofty moral rhetoric. (In this respect, nothing has changed.)

In 1973, Europe's socialist leaders cowered under the Arab oil embargo and closed their airspace to American planes delivering much needed weapons during the Yom Kippur war. In response, Golda Meir did not sugar-coat her response to German Chancellor Willie Brandt, who was, in theory, one of Israel's best friends. As a fellow socialist, she asked, "what possible meaning socialism can have when not a single socialist country in all of Europe was prepared to come to the aid of the only democratic nation in the Middle East?" (p. 254)

Menachem Begin, who became Prime Minister after the 1977 electoral "earthquake", was even more "realistic" than his predecessors, and had no such hopes or illusions about Europe. But he maintained an idealized image of the United States and its leaders as committed supporters of liberty and freedom. Before meeting Jimmy Carter for the first time, Begin told his advisers "I believe Jimmy Carter to be a decent man, and his impulse is entirely sincere. ♦ Since I believe him to be an honest man I have to believe he can detect the truth when he sees it, and is, therefore open to persuasion." (p. 388). Despite many bitter arguments, Begin clung to this belief tenaciously, until Carter's pro-Palestinian ideology, mixed with antisemitism, became inescapable.

More than half of Avner's book focuses on Begin, referred to appropriately, as "The Last Patriarch" and "the quintessential Jew" (p. 368) Begin never wrote an autobiography. Many of the academic publications are hostile and unreliable, but Avner fills, at least to a limited degree, this gap in the core literature. In contrast to the image of a leader blindly committed to an outdated ideology, the details demonstrate the realism that guided Begin's years as Prime Minister. In summarizing the first tense Carter-Begin meetings, Avner observes, "Even while the mule in him reared up against any West Bank concessions, the statesman within him strained to rein in his own impulses." Begin found a formula that "was not an outright avowal of Israeli sovereignty, but nor was it a concession to anybody else's ♦" (p.439) After many more rancorous sessions, including two weeks at Camp David (1978), this was still Begin's bottom line in the negotiations on the peace treaty with Egypt. Begin agreed to Palestinian autonomy, but not an independent state under Arafat's control, and Sadat, as well as Carter, accepted these terms.

In the political sphere, *The Prime Ministers* is a much needed antidote to the attacks of Jimmy Carter (*Palestine:Peace or Apartheid*, 2006) and Walt and Mearshimer (*The Israel Lobby and American Foreign Policy*, 2007), as well as narratives of Palestinian victimhood, and the "war crimes" accusations that have mushroomed in recent years.

For would-be journalists, diplomats, academics in the Middle East, and intelligent but confused students, Avner's book is indispensable. He does not talk down to his readers, avoids insidious post-modern academic jargon, and each chapter in this 700-page text is clear and riveting. Beginners

with little knowledge of Israel, as well as political addicts, will find important details and previously missing pieces from this uniquely articulate participant-observer who was “present at the creation”.

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