

Bibi's Choice By Richard Stengel - TIME magazine, May 28, 2012

On the final night of passover, Benjamin Netanyahu is carrying a tray piled high with the sweet marzipan cookies Moroccan Jews eat to celebrate the end of the holiday. He offers me one and says in a stage whisper, "You can get sugar shock from these things." He then pats his belly in the universal gesture of I can't afford to have one myself and grins. We are in Or Akiva, a working-class town south of Haifa where chickens roam the dusty streets and where Bibi--everybody but everybody calls him Bibi--has arrived to mark the end of the fast in a traditional Jewish celebration known as Mimouna. The owner of the dirt-floored house, who has rough hands, nine children and 23 grandchildren, toasts the Israeli Prime Minister. These are the people who worship Bibi and believe he is the only man who can lead Israel.

Ten minutes later we are in the ancient port city of Caesarea at a party at the regal home of a movie-theater magnate, where young people wear the latest fashions and do not clamor around Bibi. It is well after midnight, the party has thinned out, and we are eating shawarma prepared by an Israeli Arab from Nazareth. The Arab caterer comes over to say hello, and Bibi tousles the hair of the caterer's young son. Caesarea, Bibi tells me between mouthfuls, was built by Herod around 25 B.C. "Herod," he says with a smile, "was a much better builder than a general."

Bibi has history on his mind. Bibi always has history on his mind. He talks about what he learned from his first term, when he was practically chased out of office. "I thought I was finished in 1999," he says with a shrug, "that my career in politics was over." But then something changed. He gestures around him and suggests that in the space of half an hour, we had visited the two Israels, one blue collar, the other the gilded class. He acknowledges that his popularity with the first group--the outsiders, the Sephardim, the Russians, the ultra-Orthodox, the settlers--not the European Ashkenazic elites, brought him back to power.

After a political thunderstroke on May 8 in which he created a center-right coalition with the rival Kadima party, giving him an enormous legislative majority, Netanyahu is poised to become the longest-serving Israeli Prime Minister since David Ben-Gurion, the founding father of Israel. He has no national rival. His approval rating, roughly 50%, is at an all-time high. At a moment when incumbents around the world are being shunted aside, he is triumphant. With his bullet-proof majority, he has a chance to turn himself into the historic figure he has always yearned to be. He has become, as some commentators have dubbed him, the King of Israel.

But to be a historic figure, one must make history. Now we will find out what the king really believes. Is he a statesman or a pol, a builder or a general, the Israeli leader who can finally make peace with the Palestinians or the one who launches a potentially disastrous unilateral attack on Iran? Can he keep Israel a distinctive Jewish state and preserve it as a democratic one? As a historian of the Zionist movement, Bibi knows these choices better than anyone else. As a soldier, he also understands the dark history that lies behind the creation of Israel. The question is whether he is a prisoner of that history or can write a new narrative.

Bibi's days-old coalition is more a marriage of convenience than a high-minded quest for national unity. Eight days after the death of his beloved father, two days after calling for elections, Bibi made the deal with Kadima to give him an overwhelming majority. It's been likened to the national unity government that Israeli Prime Minister Levi Eshkol put together on the eve of the Six-Day War, a darker time than today. Some say Bibi's new alliance with a more moderate party gives him the political margin to strike Iran's nuclear facilities unilaterally. If so, Bibi is mum. He tries not to mix the issue of Iran with elective politics. Still, he is routinely hammered by the Israeli press. He gets it from all sides, even close to home. At the end of the evening, Bibi's eldest son walks over to the table. He is currently doing his military service and is slighter and fairer than his

father. "My son tells me I have too many yes-men around me," Bibi says with a knowing laugh. "Oh, what I would give for just one yes-man!"

When we see Bibi in America or Europe, he seems American or European: he adapts himself to his environment. In Israel, Bibi seems more Israeli, more Middle Eastern. His accent is heavier; his clothes are more rumpled; he is funnier and more relaxed, more rooted to the land of his father and forefathers. The former head of Israel's internal intelligence service recently called Bibi messianic, unsuited to handle the levers of power. Netanyahu himself calls the Iranians messianic, and perhaps it takes one to know one. He is profoundly ambitious and driven, but there is no doubt that he sees his primary responsibility as being the custodian of Israel's safety and that his mission is to preserve his nation for his children and grandchildren. How he does that will be his legacy.

For Netanyahu, the Jews are not so much God's chosen people as his argumentative ones. They don't take things on faith. Abraham, Moses and Job, he notes, all argued with God. And sometimes won. Like Bibi, they were ornery and maybe had a chip on their shoulder. You can imagine Bibi arguing with God, and he probably does. Israeli society hums with contest and grievance. The name Israel derives from Jacob's wrestling with the angel. Islam, Bibi has suggested, is about submission, Judaism about arguing. And if you disagree, he will argue with you. Just because everyone thinks something, he says, doesn't mean it's right.

When I ask Bibi whether he thinks the Iranians are rational actors, he replies, "People say that, but how do you know that?" How do you know that? could be his mantra. People say the Palestinians want to live in peace. How do you know that? People say the Arab Spring is good for democracy. How do you know that? His attitude is, Show me the evidence. Prove it. He sees himself as the last empiricist. He thinks people, especially liberals, take too much on faith. He dwells in reality.

Bibi can live with an unfinished argument. After all, the Israelis have been going at it for 4,000 years. Bibi may monitor the polls day to day, but he also puts things in the context of Israel's history. This too shall pass, he often seems to be saying. We can wait it out. People say the status quo is unsustainable. How do you know that? What's another five years, or 50?

Ronald Reagan, an idol of Bibi's, used to say, "Trust but verify." Bibi's attitude is "Don't trust. Verify." Like his father, he sees Jewish history as a succession of holocausts. Like his father, he has an almost mystical belief in the abiding power of anti-Semitism, as though it were more biological than cultural. "There was a sense that anti-Semitism stopped after the Holocaust," he says. "But it's been going on for millennia. And it's coming back with these challenges to the Jewish state." Others may wring their hands over Israel's militaristic global image. Not him. In the world according to Bibi, it is better to be victor than victim.

Greater Israel

Bibi presides over an Israel that is significantly more complex and diverse than that of his predecessors. It now has the second largest Jewish population in the world: 6 million, about half a million fewer than the number of Jews in the U.S. A quarter of Israel's population is Arab or non-Jewish. Israel tries to be both Sparta and Athens. It is a martial country that devotes 6.3% of its GDP to defense while being a haven for democracy and entrepreneurialism.

After the U.S. and China, Israel has the most companies listed on Nasdaq. Though that fact has helped Israel avoid the worldwide recession, not all is rosy in the Promised Land. Israel was founded by socialists and used to have the lowest income inequality in the world. Not anymore. It's expensive to live there. A cost-of-living protest in Tel Aviv last year saw hundreds of thousands of Israelis marching in the street. People there don't complain about the Palestinians or Iran; they kvetch about the economy. And when they are done worrying about their finances, they fret about fairness. Many religiously moderate Israelis complain about the political perks of the ultra-Orthodox (the haredim, or God-fearing). The ultra-Orthodox have enormous families and

enjoy welfare benefits and state subsidies. Most men don't work but instead study the Torah. They're exempt from serving in the military, the most important national demonstration of shared sacrifice--a word not bleached of meaning in a country where everyone knows someone who has lost a son. Bibi's new coalition is likely to call for a universal draft, which would include the ultra-Orthodox, in part to appease religious moderates. Unity on the matter of Iran is just as shaky. Polls show that only about a third of Israelis support a unilateral strike on Tehran's nuclear sites. Another third oppose military action. And a third are not sure. If there is a strike, pretty much everyone would like U.S. support. No one argues over that.

The Iranian Exception

On the afternoon after we talked in Caesarea, I meet Bibi at his official residence in Jerusalem. The White House this isn't. It's an unmemorable modern building in a busy part of the city. Inside, one walks along paths that have not been swept, past unfinished construction and gardens that look untended. We sit in the courtyard outside his study, which has a naked concrete floor, some rickety chairs and an old couch. When Bibi signals that he's hot, a worker silently rolls out a creaky shoulder-height rotating fan that she places right behind his head. It is the opposite of formal.

When Bibi was Prime Minister for the first time, he addressed a joint session of Congress in Washington and used these words: "The deadline for attaining this goal is extremely close ... Deterrence must be reinforced with prevention, immediate and effective prevention ... Time is running out." He was talking about Iran, and now, 16 years later, time may actually be running out.

He sees Iran as exceptional, and not in a good way. "It could be the first time we have a nuclear player who will not necessarily play by the rules. All the previous nuclear powers have been careful," he says. To him, this is as clear a threat to Israel as has ever existed. He gets exercised on the topic. "This is the greatest threat not just to Israel and the Middle East but to civilization. You don't know how they will behave."

Last September the then air-force chief of staff told Netanyahu's security cabinet that a strike by Israel alone would not affect Iran's nuclear program in a "meaningful way." Meaningful has been defined as setting back the Iranian weapons effort by at least two years. That's chiefly because Israel lacks the heavy ordnance that could destroy the underground Iranian weapons facilities or the long-range bombers that could reach the targets without midair refueling.

Which helps explain why, as the Iran nuclear talks resume next week in Baghdad, there is hope in Washington and elsewhere that Iran will knuckle under to the latest round of sanctions and agree to shut down its nuclear-enrichment facilities and allow U.N. inspections. The sanctions, one of the most effective foreign policy initiatives of the Obama Administration, have caused the Iranian rial to lose 75% of its value and unleashed hyperinflation on the Iranian economy. With Israel, says U.S. National Security Adviser Tom Donilon, "We share the same goal"--that is, preventing Iran from getting a nuclear device. "The question," he says, "is whether military action is the most effective way to accomplish your goal."

But Bibi does not share the general faith in negotiations or give any ground on the military option. There's a greater threat in doing nothing, he says, than in acting. Game theory would also suggest that there is no downside to Bibi's bluster. But he gives no hint that he is anything but dead serious.

Like Father, like Son

Bibi likes to talk about books. In conversation, he refers to books by Will Durant, Michael Walzer and Arthur Laffer. He talks about the books he has written on terrorism and the history of Zionism. His study is teeming with books. But when I leave after 2 hours of conversation, the one book he presses on me and says I must read is a slim volume by his father about the five Zionists who helped create Israel.

Bibi is extraordinarily respectful of his father. When Benzion Netanyahu died in April at the age of 102, Bibi sat shivah for the full seven days. Benzion was born in Poland and was one of the original Revisionist Zionists. They believed Israel should exist on both sides of the Jordan River, and they rejected almost any form of compromise with the Arab states. As a young man, Benzion went to the U.S. to work for Ze'ev Jabotinsky, the father of Revisionist Zionism, and after Jabotinsky died in 1940, Benzion lobbied top Republicans and helped get a plank in the 1944 GOP platform in favor of a Jewish state.

Benzion was the Israeli version of another political father, Joseph Kennedy. Like Kennedy, he put his hopes in his eldest son, Yoni, for a political future, and like Joe Kennedy Jr., Yoni was killed in combat--in his case, leading the famous 1976 raid in Entebbe, Uganda, to rescue hijacked Jewish hostages. Bibi, like Jack Kennedy, was the second son, something of an afterthought in his father's eyes.

"My father gave me two pieces of advice when I went into politics," Bibi recalls. "Never touch money, and don't use ad hominem attacks on people. But when I became Prime Minister, I asked him, What attributes does one need to lead a country? He was older then, and he asked me, What do you think? I said, You need convictions and courage and the ability to act. He said, You need that for anything. He then said what you need to lead a country is education, and by that he meant an understanding of history, the knowledge to be able to put things in perspective." Bibi considers this for a moment. "I didn't expect that answer," he says and smiles.

Benzion's lifework was a 1,384-page history of the Spanish Inquisition. The book has a radical thesis: that the conversos, the Jews who had willingly converted to Christianity and were then killed by the thousands for allegedly practicing Judaism in secret, had done no such thing. Almost all of them were practicing Christians, Benzion wrote, and their extermination came from a deep and murderous anti-Semitism, not from religious persecution. Even conversion, he suggested, doesn't protect Jews from anti-Semitism. Benzion believed that the history of the Jews is a history of holocausts and that the enemies of the Jews like the Arabs will be happy only when the Jewish people no longer exist.

In the 1950s and '60s, Benzion taught at Dropsie College for Hebrew and Cognate Learning in Philadelphia. "I cried when my father told me we were moving to America," Bibi recalls. Bibi enrolled at suburban Cheltenham High School. "Everyone was divided into nerds and jocks. I was both. I was in four honors classes. It was like being tutored in the best private schools."

According to Bibi, when he was a senior, he applied to Yale and got in. But he decided to do his military service in Israel and kept deferring his acceptance. He joined the Sayeret Matkal, the elite special-forces unit of the Israel Defense Forces, and stayed in for five years, participating in many counterterrorism operations and returning in 1973 for the October War. On the bookshelf of his private office is a picture of his unit. He walks over to the photograph and describes each man to me. He tells the story of a tall, slender soldier who almost died because he sat down in the snow of the Golan Heights when they were fighting in Syria. "You can freeze in seconds," he says. Bibi points out the Druze guide who, he says, "saved my life twice," once by pulling Bibi out of a river by his hair. He then describes what each man is doing today. Bibi rarely talks about his military service, and when he does, he talks more about his comrades than himself.

He decided not to attend Yale but to go to MIT because he thought the future was in technology; he earned a degree in architecture and then got a master's in business administration. Then he worked for a while in Boston at Boston Consulting Group. What he took away from that was Bruce Henderson's idea that every company must find its competitive advantage if it is to succeed over its rivals. He says he has applied the same strategy to Israel. It was at Boston Consulting that he met Mitt Romney. "We did not know each other that well," Bibi says. "He was the whiz kid. I was just in the back of the room." Bibi says he has seen Romney only a handful of times over the years and only once this year. They spoke for 10 minutes during his visit to Washington in March, mainly about Iran.

When his brother Yoni was killed at Entebbe, Bibi was devastated. He adored Yoni. In Jerusalem in 1979 he created a conference on terrorism. It was a great success, and Moshe Arens, then the Israeli ambassador to the U.S., invited him to be the No. 2 in the embassy in Washington in 1982. In 1983, Arens was summoned back to Israel to be the Defense Minister, and Bibi became Israel's ambassador to the U.N. and the face of Israel on American TV. He appeared regularly on Nightline and became the Israeli-American It boy--confident, handsome, fearsomely articulate in virtually accentless English. Every suburban Jewish mother had a crush on him. Until Bibi, Israel had had only one appealing spokesperson in the U.S., the dapper, British-accented Abba Eban. But if Eban was Masterpiece Theatre, Bibi was the streetwise local anchorman who told it like it was. Bibi was the first Israeli-American crossover artist and acquired a keen understanding of American media on which he has relied ever since.

He also has a better understanding of U.S. politics than many American politicians. His speech to a joint session of Congress in 2011 received 29 standing ovations. "I follow American politics," he says evenly, "but I don't interfere in American politics." The White House might disagree. Until Netanyahu came along, Israeli Prime Ministers believed that the key relationship was with the U.S. President. But Bibi had a different insight: an Israeli Prime Minister must have a relationship not only with the President but also with Congress, the American public, American Jewry and, of course, the U.S. media. To Bibi's way of thinking, the President is not necessarily even the first among equals.

Bibi is popular among American Jews, but so is Barack Obama. A survey in April found that 61% of Jewish voters favored Obama and only 28% were for Mitt Romney. Jewish voters are one of the few groups in the U.S. that have historically voted against their economic interests, usually backing Democratic candidates over GOP counterparts by at least 2 to 1. And though Obama ruffled the feathers of many American Jews in his first two years in office, tensions have mostly abated. Most of Obama's Jewish bundlers have reupped for the campaign. Some close advisers to Bibi see Obama as the one exception in a long line of Israeli exceptionalists in the White House. This group regards Obama as someone who has no special fidelity to Israel, unlike his immediate predecessor. But at the moment, both sides are singing "Kumbaya." Bibi says cooperation with U.S. intelligence is good. Says Donilon: "I think the Israeli-U.S. relationship is as strong as it's ever been."

No Justice, No Peace

Bibi has never made peace with the peace process. "Peace treaties don't guarantee peace," he says. He believes that the Israelis and the Palestinians have competing and incompatible narratives. Forget the 1967 borders: Bibi wants to go back to 1948 or further. "The first 50 years before 1967 were all about conflict," he says. "So what's new?"

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas--Bibi calls him by his honorific, Abu Mazen--would like to resume negotiations where they left off with Bibi's predecessor Ehud Olmert. Abbas and Olmert met 36 times in 2007 and 2008, and both say they came closer to a deal than anyone had before.

When Obama took office, people thought he would bring a new dynamic to the talks that would favor the Palestinians. Obama asked Bibi to freeze settlement construction for one year as an act of good faith. And then Abbas did not come to the table. When Abbas was finally coaxed to do so, he presented Bibi with the same package Olmert had negotiated. Abbas says he won't talk while settlements are being built, and Bibi says he wants talks "without preconditions." The only freeze now is in the negotiations themselves.

But Bibi has taken a harder line. He says he will accept only Israeli forces, not NATO's or anyone else's, to provide security in the Jordan Valley. Perhaps the biggest impediment is Bibi's insistence that the Palestinians recognize Israel as a "Jewish state." In other words, Palestinians must not only renounce claims to present-day Israel but also accept Israel's historical narrative. It is a little eerie to hear Bibi insist on this because it echoes what his father said over and over for more than 50 years about Israel. To some, Bibi isn't negotiating; he is dictating terms.

The stalemate is what drove Abbas to the U.N. to seek full recognition and membership from the world body last September. The real anxiety for Israel is that recognition of Palestine would give them access to the International Criminal Court, opening Israel up to a potentially vast number of claims. Meanwhile, settlement construction has resumed with a vengeance. Settlements and the buffer zones and roads supporting them now constitute 40% of the West Bank.

The longer Bibi and I talk about the Palestinians, the more I get the sense he just does not believe that they want peace or that they are capable of democracy if they had it. He remains skeptical about the direction of the Arab Spring. "Locke and Montesquieu are not exactly household names there yet," he says.

But what Bibi does have now is a governing coalition that will not leak or collapse if he opens negotiations. He will no longer have to look over his shoulder. He will not have to call elections at the drop of a hat. He has not had that before, and it gives him room to maneuver and room to compromise. "Now he is the emperor ... he can do anything," Abu Mazen said last week. "If I were him, I would do it now, now, now."

Something to Believe In

Bibi likes to say Moses was a great leader but not a great navigator. But to Bibi's delight, it turns out that Moses' sense of direction wasn't so bad after all. The discovery in December 2010 of a gargantuan deposit of natural gas off Israel's Mediterranean coast and an even larger area of shale oil not far from Jerusalem will likely turn Israel into a net oil and gas exporter. No longer will the Arabs in the Middle East have a monopoly on energy.

This bit of serendipity is not enough to turn Bibi into an optimist, but it is something tangible that will help him secure Israel's future. It is, in fact, something to trust. But there isn't much else he trusts. Obama often quotes Martin Luther King Jr.'s notion that the arc of the moral universe is long but bends toward justice. Bibi's not so sure.

In the end, Bibi would like to be a hero, but he will not be one at the expense of Israel's security. He wants to be a defining figure in Israeli history and a significant player on the world stage, but he will not risk what he sees as Israel's safety to be one. His ambition and now his security as Prime Minister, though, may let him take that risk. Of the Palestinians, he says, "If they figure it out, they will never have a better partner than me. I can make it happen and make it stick."

He is a believer in Israeli and Jewish exceptionalism. The Jews have a deeply ingrained ingenuity that has always helped them survive. "Now, with our ingenuity, we also have gas. We're in a providential situation. Our story is one of overcoming tremendous odds. People respect that." He is silent for a moment. "If you're a deeply religious person, you have a guarantee." He pauses, knowing that he has none. "It would be great to sit back. That would be nice." Nice as that might be, he knows it is an option he does not have.

+++++

Why Tehran Might Be Ready to Talk By Joe Klein

TIME magazine, May 28, 2012

Here is how it usually works when the world attempts to negotiate with Iran about its rogue nuclear program: The U.N. passes a resolution, or threatens sanctions, or imposes sanctions. Iran's friends and trading partners, like Russia and China, quietly exert pressure for talks. Iran agrees to talks but dawdles, arguing that it will need time to prepare. Months pass. Finally, there are talks, which consist of dueling speeches. The members of the U.N. group designated to negotiate with Iran--the U.S., Britain, France, Germany, Russia and China--present a

statement listing the world's concerns about the Iranian program. The Iranians read a statement demanding an end to sanctions before any talks can begin. And that's it. The Iranians go home, continue to enrich their uranium and continue to refuse the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) access to inspect certain sites. That is what happened in Geneva in 2010 and in Istanbul in 2011. But something very different is happening this year.

A meeting was scheduled for Istanbul on April 13. At first, it seemed the same old dodge: weeks were wasted as the Iranians attempted to switch the site of the meeting to Baghdad. That effort met a brick wall; the U.N. coalition, often a spongy alliance, refused to countenance it, and the Iranians ... backed down. And then they began to actually talk with the European Union's designated negotiator, Helga Schmid. Their statement at the Istanbul meeting was substantive. They agreed to another meeting, which will take place on May 23 in Baghdad. They've continued to talk to Schmid. They seem to understand what the world is asking of them. They promise to make a serious proposal in Baghdad. There is some cautious optimism that, as the retired U.S. diplomat Nicholas Burns puts it, "for the first time in 32 years, since the Iranian revolution, there is the possibility of serious, substantive and sustained talks with Iran."

What on earth happened? Diplomacy happened. The Obama Administration conducted a quiet, persistent two-year campaign to bring the Russians and Chinese into a united front supporting the most serious round of economic sanctions ever passed by the U.N.; the European Union and the U.S. have imposed further sanctions, against Iranian oil and Iran's central bank, that are scheduled to kick in this summer. The economic impact of these sanctions has been greater than anticipated. Iran's economy is nearing collapse; its oil sits on ships, awaiting customers. Iran's Revolutionary Guards Corps, the real power behind the regime, controls about a third of the Iranian economy, and it is being hurt badly. Iranian sources speculate that the Guards have been pressuring Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei to make a deal or get the sanctions eased by appearing to make a deal. But it's difficult to know for sure what's happening within the regime.

Israel has made a difference too. Its covert campaign to sabotage the Iranian nuclear program has been very successful. Its overt threats to bomb Iran's facilities are taken seriously by the regime, even if most experts believe that Israel lacks the capacity to do much permanent damage to the Iranian program.

So what can we expect from the Baghdad talks? The biggest issue on the table is the IAEA's ability to make intrusive, unannounced inspections of the Iranian nuclear program, including visits to military facilities like Parchin, where the Iranians may have been testing the blasting devices that can initiate a nuclear explosion. The U.N. has also demanded that Iran suspend its enrichment program. Neither of those concessions is likely to be made in Baghdad. The Iranians have made noises about suspending their program to enrich uranium to 20% purity, a precursor to the creation of a nuclear bomb, in return for an easing of the sanctions. Iran may agree to ship out its 20%-pure uranium in return for fuel rods that can be used in its medical reactor, which creates isotopes for radiation therapy in Tehran. Or it may offer to simply talk about these possibilities. It won't agree to suspend its program to enrich uranium to 3.5% purity, the level necessary for peaceful nuclear power.

If Iran offers to suspend production of 20% uranium, that will be big news. And there will be pressure to ease the sanctions. It is possible that the Russians or the Chinese--or even the French, now that Nicolas Sarkozy is no longer in charge--will concede, which is what the Iranians are obviously hoping for. The true test of the Obama Administration's diplomacy will be if it can hold the coalition together and continue to demand rigorous IAEA inspections. Only if the coalition holds, and no immediate concessions are made, will we see if Iran is really serious about negotiations this time.

+++++

Defending Israel (and Waiting for a Miracle)

American Jews could play a useful role in aiding our Israeli cousins to see that they are destroying what was noble about their country. Why won't they? Asks **Eric Alterman**.

Those in the market for conspiracy theories might be pleased by the mainstream media reaction to Peter Beinart's *The Crisis of Zionism*. Not only has the book been widely attacked but so too have its author's motives for writing it. Beinart's book is essentially a call for American Jews to challenge the professional Jewish establishment that has failed to stand up for the liberal values of the community it professes to represent and acts instead as an apologist for Israel's rightward, anti-democratic drift toward permanent occupation. With an impressive uniformity of opinion, Beinart's reviewers have by and large ignored the details of his critique. Jewish liberals, centrists, neocons and far-right chauvinists all apparently agree that Beinart has written the wrong book. Instead of focusing his attention on the shortcomings of Israeli and American Jewish institutions, he should be complaining about Palestinian rejectionism and suicide-bombing (as might be expected of former protégés of Marty Peretz), as it is obviously their behavior, rather than any action that Israel may have been forced to take in self-defense, that lies at the root of the conflict.

Even were one to grant the substance of the anti-Beinart attacks, one would still be left with Lenin's age-old question: What is to be done? Where are the alternatives to an all-out effort -- risks and all -- to end the occupation? While some of the reviewers profess distaste for the policies of the Israeli government, none propose a solution that involves anything much more than Palestinian surrender. And since that is not going to happen -- indeed the political weakness of Palestinian "moderates" is often cited as yet another roadblock to a sustainable peace agreement -- then what we are left with is the passive acceptance of Israel's slow-motion destruction of its democracy coupled with an apparently endless (and brutal) military occupation.

As is always the case when Israel is criticized, discussion in that country has been far more open and self-confident in its press than in our own. Writing in the invaluable +972 webzine, Mairav Zonszein observes, "Beinart's writing does not shed new light on the situation, but the fact that he is making such waves reflects just how hard it is for American Jews to figure out their identity vis-à-vis Israel -- and how, after 64 years trying to figure it out, it continues to be the mainstay of American Jewish discourse." Her colleague Noam Sheizaf writes, "The panic with which the 'Crisis of Zionism' was met had nothing to do with the book's not-so-new political message...but rather from the thought that Beinart does represent something real, that the Jewish establishment is indeed failing, not in terms of political effectiveness, but on a much deeper level that has to do with the moral values and the self-perception of the people it claims to represent."

In contrast to Beinart's book, which has dominated discussion in Jewish literary circles since its publication, another book, *Side by Side* -- edited by the late Dan Bar-On as well as Sami Adwan, the Israeli and Palestinian co-founders of Peace Research Institute in the Middle East (PRIME), together with Eyal Nayeh -- has received virtually no attention. This is a shame, as it is at least as central to any possibility for Middle Eastern peace as Beinart's book. One of PRIME's projects, begun in 2002, was to try to construct a high school text based on a single narrative history of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict. This goal has long been, in your columnist's view, the single most crucial building block for a democratically based -- and therefore politically stable -- two-state solution. So long as every new "fact" merely confirms one side's narrative that places all the fault on the other, rejectionists will continue to rule unchallenged.

Alas, it proved impossible. And so *Side by Side* instead tells the story of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict from an Israeli and a Palestinian perspective on alternating pages. This follows the example of PRIME's series of three pamphlets, which included a third, blank section for students to write their own histories. Perhaps predictably, however, neither side's schools would use them. In 2004, in fact, far-right Israeli education minister Limor Livnat threatened to discipline teachers who taught from the booklets, and Palestinian teachers were threatened with violence when they tried. As Bar-On wrote, the failure, first to produce a single narrative and second to find educators willing to teach both versions to their students, demonstrated that "both the Palestinians and the Jewish-Israelis were not truly ready to move forward with the political arrangement because they were incapable of accepting each other's 'otherness.'"

American Jews could play a useful role in aiding our Israeli cousins to see that they are destroying what was noble and admirable in the creation of a democratic and egalitarian Jewish homeland over fears that are in some significant respects (albeit not entirely) driven by psychological rather than real-world factors. But as the ferocious reaction to Beinart's book, coupled with the nonreaction to the PRIME project, demonstrates, the opposite is unfortunately going to be the case. As Sheizaf observes, the project of "Jewish establishment and members of the Jewish media -- the manufacturers of ideology" is to do whatever is necessary "to relieve the pain of their community by blurring the existence of a problem. It is an ungrateful task, which will last as long as the occupation does."

So again, the alternative? Kiddushin 39b in the Babylonian Talmud tells us, "And wherever the potential for harm is ever present we do not rely on miracles." Yet that is exactly what the American Jewish establishment and its media apologists do when it comes to the preservation of a Jewish and democratic Israel. And therein lies the true "crisis" of Zionism.

Eric Alterman is a Distinguished Professor of English, Brooklyn College, City University of New York, Professor of Journalism at the CUNY Graduate School of Journalism, and a regular columnist for The Nation magazine. His latest book is *Kabuki Democracy*.

Copyright © 2012 The Nation -- distributed by Agence Global