

Feeling Good about Feeling Bad

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My Promised Land: The Triumph and Tragedy of Israel by Ari Shavit

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Ari Shavit is a *Haaretz* columnist admired by liberal Zionists in America, where his book has been the focus of much attention. In April 1897 his great-grandfather Herbert Bentwich sailed for Jaffa, leading a delegation of 21 Zionists who were investigating whether Palestine would make a suitable site for a Jewish national home. Theodor Herzl, whose pamphlet *The Jewish State* had been published the year before, had never been to Palestine and hoped Bentwich's group would produce a comprehensive report of its visit for the First Zionist Congress which was to be held in Basel in August that year. Bentwich was well-to-do, Western European and religious. Herzl and most early Zionists were chiefly interested in helping the impoverished and persecuted Jews of Eastern Europe, but Bentwich was more worried about the number of secular and emancipated Jews in Western Europe who were becoming assimilated. A solution to the problems of both groups, he believed, could be found by resurrecting the Land of Israel in Palestine.

At the end of the 18th century, roughly 250,000 people lived in Palestine, including 6500 Jews, nearly all of them Sephardic. By 1897, when Bentwich's delegation made its visit, the Jewish share of the population had more than tripled, with Ashkenazi Zionist immigration pushing it up towards 8 per cent. Bentwich, Shavit writes, seems not to have noticed the large majority of Gentiles – the Arab stevedores who carried him ashore, the Arab pedlars in the Jaffa market, the Arab guides and servants in his convoy. Looking out from the top of a water tower in central Palestine, he didn't see the thousands of Muslims and Christians below, or the more than half a million Arabs living in Palestine's twenty towns and cities and hundreds of villages. He didn't see them, Shavit tells us, because most lived in hamlets surrounded by vacant territory; because he saw the Land of Israel as stretching far beyond the settlements of Palestine into the deserts of present-day Jordan; and because there wasn't yet a concept of Palestinian national identity and therefore there were no Palestinians.

Bentwich's blindness was tragic, Shavit laments, but it was necessary to save the Jews. In April 1903, 49 Jews were murdered in a pogrom in Kishinev, the capital of Moldova. More than a million Jews fled Eastern Europe over the next decade, the majority of them to America. Most of the 35,000 who immigrated to Palestine were secular and idealistic. They believed Palestine could accommodate Arabs and Jews. They lived in communal agrarian settlements, and transformed the pale, effete Jew of the ghetto into the tanned, masculine pioneer of the socialist kibbutz.

By 1935, Jews made up more than a quarter of Palestine's population and in dozens of places Palestinian tenant farmers had been evicted to make way for Jewish orange groves and agricultural settlements. But the arrival of Jewish capital, technology and medicine, Shavit writes, didn't just benefit the Jews. He cites a 1936 article by the leader of Rehovot's orange growers: 'Never did a colonial project bring so much blessing as the blessing brought upon the country and its inhabitants by our project.'

With Hitler's rise, many more Jews sought to immigrate to Palestine. The violence of the 1936-39 Arab Revolt, a nationalist uprising against the British Mandate and mass Jewish immigration, resulted in the deaths of five thousand Palestinians and three hundred Jews and shocked the local Jewish community. Palestinian opposition to Jewish immigration wasn't new, but before this, riots and violence had been brief and sporadic. Zionism's utopian phase came to an abrupt end, Shavit writes, to be replaced by the realisation that ethnic conflict and population transfer were unavoidable.

When the United Nations proposed partitioning Palestine into a Jewish and an Arab state in 1947, Jews made up less than a third of the population and owned 7 per cent of the land. The UN proposal, which was rejected by the Palestinian leadership and the Arab League, granted 56 per cent of the land to the Jewish minority. The plan was agreed even so, and war broke out on 29 November 1947. By the time Arab armies invaded in May 1948, around a thousand had died on each side and some 300,000 Palestinians had fled or been expelled.

In July 1948 the Israeli army attacked the Palestinian village of Lydda, located between Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. Soldiers threw hand grenades into houses, fired an anti-tank shell at a crowded mosque, and sprayed the survivors with machine-gun fire. More than two hundred were killed. The prime minister, David Ben Gurion, instructed Yigal Allon, the operation's leader, to deport the surviving residents. Another commander, Yitzhak Rabin, issued the order: 'The inhabitants of Lydda must be expelled quickly, without regard to age.'

These and other episodes of what Shavit calls 'cleansing' were not an aberration but an integral part of the Zionist mission to create a state with the largest possible Jewish majority. 'If Zionism was to be, Lydda could not be,' he writes. 'If Lydda was to be, Zionism could not be.' 'One thing is clear to me,' Shavit goes on:

the brigade commander and the military governor were right to get angry at the bleeding-heart Israeli liberals of later years who condemn what they did in Lydda but enjoy the fruits of their deed ... If need be, I'll stand by the damned. Because I know that if it wasn't for them, the state of Israel would not have been born.

After the war, progress took precedence over reflection, Shavit writes. Survival was all. Denial took root: the Holocaust was not mentioned; Sephardic and Middle Eastern Jewish culture were marginalised; Palestinian refugees were forgotten. History was erased. Hebrew names replaced Eastern European ones. The names of biblical locations supplanted those of Arab

cities. In the decade after the war, four hundred now empty Palestinian villages were demolished and four hundred new Israeli ones were built.

Enormous challenges confronted the fledgling state: rationing, poverty, an influx of traumatised Holocaust survivors. In less than four years the Jewish population more than doubled. Against all odds, it thrived, Shavit writes, and became an egalitarian social democratic state. Science, industry and agriculture flourished. In the desert, a nuclear reactor was built. Much to Shavit's regret, however, the enlightened Israel built by Ben Gurion didn't last long. After the triumph of 1967, when Israel conquered Sinai, the Golan Heights and the rest of mandatory Palestine, came the devastating surprise attack led by Egypt and Syria in 1973. The Labor Party, which under various names had been the dominant political force since before the founding of the state, never recovered. Seeking to fill the void left by the old Labor Zionist settlement movement, religious Zionists spread out across the hills of Judea and Samaria, land of more biblical significance than the coastal territory held by Israel before 1967.

A peace movement grew from Labor's ashes. Shavit considered himself a member, but over time he came to see its faults. Its base was a narrow Ashkenazi elite and its leaders were dilettantes, he writes. It used calls for peace as a cudgel against settlers and the right. Its moralising, misleading focus on the relatively straightforward issue of the 1967 occupation was a way of denying responsibility for what Shavit views as the irresolvable tragedy of 1948. It concentrated on West Bank settlements, he believes, in order to distract attention from the evacuated Palestinian villages in Israel proper, where the movement's leaders now lived. Promising a utopian vision no less messianic than that of the settlers, it conflated an end to occupation with peace, ignoring Palestinian aspirations and Arab political culture. It counted, Shavit came to realise, on a peace partner that didn't exist, and deluded itself about the nature of the conflict and the brutality of the Middle East. Clashes between Palestinians and Israelis didn't begin in 1967; an end to the occupation isn't the Palestinians' only demand. If the occupation ends, Palestinian citizens of Israel will still want to change the Jewish character of the state. The refugees will not give up on returning to Lydda. Lydda, Shavit writes, is the essence of the conflict. And Lydda has no solution.

Equal parts memoir, popular history and polemic, *My Promised Land* makes a forceful argument about the unlikelihood of a two-state solution, but not from either of the political standpoints typically associated with this position, the far left and the hard right. Instead it provides a window into the thinking of the largest section of the Israeli electorate, the amorphous, conflicted centre which, after the failure of Oslo, the Second Intifada and the problems that followed the 2005 withdrawal from Gaza, has drifted towards the right, without wholly identifying with it. It's a sympathetic portrait of the Holocaust survivors who eked out an existence in the housing estates of a recently founded Israel; the technology entrepreneurs propping up an economy that includes a dangerously large and growing non-working population; and the young West Bank settlers in their knitted yarmulkes, who 'admired the historical Labor Movement' but 'despised what Labor had become'.

Shavit is critical of his own tribe, the Ashkenazi Labor Zionist elite: he describes its debasement of Jews who came to Israel from Arab countries and were indiscriminately sprayed with DDT and forced into camps, some of them surrounded by barbed wire; its fear that Arabic-speaking Jews and ultra-Orthodox yeshiva graduates would overtake 'their' country, turning it into another religious Middle Eastern state and destroying its Western foundations from within; its blurring of the line between condemnation of the right's politics and contempt for its lower-status supporters; and its hollow vision of peace, which 'had no Arabs', as Shavit puts it, and was used as a means of attacking the underclasses that brought Menachem Begin's Likud to power in 1977.

Shavit describes his disillusionment with the Israeli left and how he came to the view, held by much of the right, that Jewish and Palestinian nationalism can't be reconciled. He condemns the left for acting as if the struggle with the Palestinians started in 1967 and could be solved by ending the military occupation. He accuses it of using 1967 to distract attention from Israel's responsibility for 1948, the true basis of the conflict. But in focusing on the expulsions of 1948, Shavit himself does something similar, drawing attention to the war while overlooking much of the strife that preceded and followed it.

One reason Israelis and their leaders have had such difficulty acknowledging even partial responsibility for the expulsions of 1948 is that they have not yet appreciated the way Palestinians view the decades before the war. Palestinians do not seek an apology for mistaken tactical decisions made during the heat of battle. They want Israelis to recognise the injustice of the displacement they've suffered since the dawn of Zionism. Shavit is to be commended for not glossing over the misdeeds of Israeli soldiers in 1948, documented over the past few decades by the Israeli revisionists known as the New Historians – Benny Morris, Avi Shlaim and Tom Segev, for example – although he congratulates himself rather too many times for having dared 'touch the fire'. But he doesn't merely describe what happened in 1948: he attempts to justify it, and his book is in large part a moral defence of Zionism's costs to the local population.

Curiously for a book so concerned with the legitimacy of Zionism, *My Promised Land* doesn't make the most powerful and obvious arguments for the right of Jews to self-determination in what is now the state of Israel: the fact of its being enshrined in international law, in the form of UN Resolution 181, reaffirmed in the declarations of independence of both Israel, in 1948, and Palestine, in 1988. No matter the actions of their forebears, there are now more than six million Jews in Israel, 75 per cent of its population. And denying Jews their own country would be to seek redress for past injustices by creating new ones.

Rather than make Israel's case on these narrow and fairly uncontroversial grounds, Shavit chooses a more ambitious, and fraught, approach: a history of Israel in which the 1948 war emerges as the exception that proves his country's morality. Shavit relegates other difficult aspects of Israeli history to the shadows. The resulting *mélange* of legend and fact is not firm ground on which to stake a moral claim, and he makes many assertions that are easy to dispute: that early Zionists were oblivious to the existence of a native population; that there

were few alternatives available to Jews in Eastern Europe; that the historic right of the Jewish people to establish sovereignty in their ancient homeland trumped the rights and wishes of the local population who had lived there for more than a thousand years; the economic boon Arabs enjoyed as a result of Zionist immigration; the socialist egalitarianism of the kibbutz as a moral justification for Zionism; the Holocaust as a retroactive justification of the Zionist settlement that preceded it by more than half a century; and the fairness of the democracy established after Israel's founding. Several of these points have some merit, but all are presented with glaring omissions and misrepresentations, even by the standards of mainstream Zionist historiography.

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Shavit is a secularist who sees the decision to establish a Jewish national home in Palestine as based on broad universal grounds – the need of a persecuted people for asylum – and not on the belief that the Jews own the land by virtue of God's promise to Abraham. Save for brief references to the Holy Land and the Jews' ancient homeland, religion is almost entirely absent from his description of early Zionism. Yet, as Anita Shapira, among the strongest critics of the New Historians, shows in her new book, *Israel: A History*, religious ideas, traditions and texts were at the heart of the enterprise from the start. In the Yishuv, the pre-state Jewish community, 'the Bible was the seminal text,' according to Shapira. 'It preserved historical memory ... and also concretised the Land of Israel, forming a direct connection between past and present.' As she makes clear, the piety of Eastern European Jews was the main reason the secular leaders of the Zionist movement chose to settle in Palestine and not in Argentina or the East African territory offered by the UK government.

Shavit writes that if Jews hadn't come to Palestine at the turn of the 20th century they would have had no future. This was hardly the case, as Shapira points out: millions of Eastern European Jews fled to the West, mostly to America, and large numbers of the small Zionist minority chose not to remain in Palestine. Ahad Ha'am, one of Zionism's most influential thinkers, whom Shavit calls 'the national moral leader', believed that most Jews should go to live in the United States and only a select few should establish a spiritual centre in Palestine, a model society for the diaspora to emulate.

Echoing the old Zionist slogan 'a land without a people for a people without a land', Shavit writes that, 'looking out over the vacant territory of 1897, Bentwich sees the quiet, the emptiness, the promise.' Some of the most prominent Zionists of the time, including Ahad Ha'am, didn't see that emptiness. They noticed the local Arabs, and foresaw war with them. Six years before Bentwich arrived in Palestine, Ahad Ha'am had written:

We must surely learn, from both our past and present history, how careful we must be not to provoke the anger of the native people by doing them wrong ... And what do our brothers do? Exactly the opposite! ... They deal with the Arabs with hostility and cruelty, trespass unjustly, beat them shamefully without sufficient cause, and even boast about their actions ... even if [the Arabs]

are silent and endlessly reserved, they keep their anger in their hearts. And these people will be revengeful like no other ... this society ... will have to face the prospects of both internal and external war.

As Shapira shows, after the Seventh Zionist Congress in Basel in 1905 a heated debate arose about the suitability of Palestine as a national home, given its large Arab population. A lecture by Yitzhak Epstein, 'A Hidden Question', helped spark the debate, exacerbating tensions between the territorialists, who wanted to establish Jewish self-rule wherever they could, and the Zionists of Zion, who insisted on a national home in Zion-Palestine. 'Will those who are dispossessed remain silent and accept what is being done to them?' Epstein asked. 'In the end, they will wake up and return to us in blows what we have looted from them with our gold!'

These internal debates are almost entirely ignored in Shavit's narrative, a striking omission in a book so concerned with moral defence. Instead he asserts that Zionist settlement was justified by the need of Eastern European Jews to escape persecution, but passes over the attendant moral questions: did persecution in Europe mean that Jewish refugees had to be accommodated anywhere that could take them, or was there a special obligation on Palestine? Did the persecuted Jews have a right merely to refuge in Palestine, or to their own state there, even if that meant displacing the local population? Was it legitimate for the British to promise the Jews a national home in Palestine? In avoiding these issues Shavit brings us no closer to understanding the way Palestinians view their history and entrenches a narrative of moral righteousness that will hinder any reconciliation.

Although he questions the Zionists' actions in the 1948 war, Shavit has no doubts about the justness of their cause before that point. 'In the spring of 1935,' he writes, 'Zionism is a just national movement' representing 'an absolute, universal justice that cannot be refuted. At this point in time the injustice caused to native Arabs by the Zionist project is still limited.' This blunt assessment, and others like it, might be more convincing if Shavit could explain why Israel's second prime minister, Moshe Sharett, then going by the name Shertok, said in 1936 that 'there is not a single Arab who has not been hurt by the entry of Jews into Palestine.' Or the reason Ben Gurion said in 1938: 'When we say that the Arabs are the aggressors and we defend ourselves – this is only half the truth ... the fighting is only one aspect of the conflict which is in its essence a political one. And politically we are the aggressors and they defend themselves.' More than seventy years after the most prominent Zionists said these things, Shavit by comparison displays a Manichean obtuseness.

He repeatedly invokes kibbutz socialism as a moral justification for Zionism, as if the harmony of the kibbutz could justify the Zionists' behaviour towards non-Jews. 'Without the communal aspect of kibbutz,' he writes, 'socialist Zionism will lack legitimacy and will be perceived as an unjust colonialist movement ... By working the land with their bare hands and by living in poverty and undertaking a daring, unprecedented social experiment, they refute any charge that they are about to seize a land that is not theirs.' The egalitarian kibbutz, the orange grove, being close to nature and working the land – these are presented

by Shavit as the essence of life in Palestine during the British Mandate. Arabs flourished alongside Jews; injustices to the locals were offset by the progress Zionism brought. All of this fits nicely with the story told to children at Zionist summer camps, but crucial bits are missing from Shavit's picture: the promotion of 'Hebrew labour', 'Hebrew land', 'Hebrew produce' and the efforts to close the Jewish economy to Arab workers; the repeated Arab petitions against Jewish immigration dating back to 1891; the bourgeois, urban lifestyle chosen by most immigrants in spite of the promotion of a rustic, pioneering ideal. 'Despite all the preaching,' Shapira writes, 'in 1931 only 19 per cent of the Jews in Palestine lived in agricultural settlements, and subsequently this figure dwindled.'

The Arab Revolt of 1936-39, Shavit writes, 'pushed Zionism from a state of utopian bliss to a state of dystopian conflict', paving the way for 1948. But this era of innocence is a figment of his imagination. In 1886, an Arab riot against Jewish settlers was described in the Zionist press as a pogrom; subsequent riots took place in 1920, 1921, 1929 and 1933.

When Shavit asserts that the 1948 war was an unavoidable consequence of Zionism he seems to forget his depiction of happy coexistence in the early years of the Yishuv. 'The conquest of Lydda and the expulsion of Lydda were no accident,' he writes. 'They were an inevitable phase of the Zionist revolution that laid the foundation for the Zionist state. Lydda is an integral and essential part of our story. And when I try to be honest about it, I see that the choice is stark: either reject Zionism because of Lydda, or accept Zionism along with Lydda.' But Shavit doesn't back up his claim that the expulsion of Lydda was inevitable. Lydda was situated on land granted to the Arab state in the 1947 UN partition plan. Unlike that of the southern village of Isdud (present-day Ashdod) or the northern town of Nazareth, Lydda's conquest wasn't necessary to correct the flawed borders of the partition plan, which divided the Jewish state into discontinuous thirds. At the time of Lydda's July 1948 conquest, Shapira writes, the Arab combatants were 'ill-equipped, partially trained soldiers', outnumbered by Jewish forces (as they remained for the rest of the war) and with 'no co-ordination and no central command'. Shavit writes that taking over Lydda, expelling its residents and forbidding their return was necessary, but he doesn't explain why this wasn't also true of the Old City of Jerusalem, Bethlehem or any number of other Palestinian towns that abutted the new state's borders. As Shapira shows, after some discussion, Israeli leaders decided not to conquer other areas and expel their Palestinian residents, even though they had the capacity to do so. Towards the end of the war, she writes, Ben Gurion 'rejected Yigal Allon's proposals to conquer the West Bank, which at the time was militarily achievable. He was sensitive to the demographic problem of governing hundreds of thousands of Arabs, and did his utmost to avoid that snare.'

In a broader sense, however, Shavit may be right that the displacement of Palestinians, though not on the same scale, was on the cards from early on, and that the expulsions of 1948 were a natural extension of the goals of the mainstream Zionists who sought to create a Jewish state for a largely Eastern European minority population despite the objections of the native Arab majority. 'The partial dispossession of another people,' Shavit writes, 'is at the

core of the Zionist enterprise.’ Yet Shavit leaves curiously unexamined the decades-old ideology that he says drove this dispossession. He shrugs off questions about it by saying one either accepts Zionism or one doesn’t. At other times he describes the Holocaust as ‘Zionism’s ultimate argument’, implying that the movement’s justification before the Second World War is primarily retroactive. He doesn’t make a serious attempt to defend Zionism on particularist grounds – Jews have a right to the land because of God’s promise, or because of hereditary links to its ancient inhabitants – and he doesn’t try to reply to the universalist questions put to Zionism from its earliest days, such as the argument made by a delegation of Palestinian Muslim and Christian leaders in response to a 1921 report by the British Mandatory authorities: ‘What confusion would ensue all the world over if this principle on which the Jews base their “legitimate” claim were carried out in other parts of the world! What migrations of nations must follow! The Spaniards in Spain would have to make room for the Arabs and Moors who conquered and ruled their country for over seven hundred years.’

Shavit also fails to trace the roots of Zionist ideology to the romantic, exclusivist, *völkisch* nationalism of the Eastern European and German lands from which most early Zionists came. With one exception, he doesn’t ask whether that ideology played a role in driving the expulsions of 1948 and the state policies that followed the war, some of which continue to this day. The exception is West Bank settlement, of which he asks, is it ‘a benign continuation of Zionism or a malignant mutation of Zionism’, and concludes that, though its *modus operandi* is similar to that of early Zionist settlement, ‘the historic and conceptual context is completely different’ and so it is ‘an aberration, a grotesque reincarnation’.

Throughout the book, Shavit writes misleadingly of a unitary Zionism, ignoring the considerable diversity within the movement. His version of Zionism goes without contestation from its late 19th-century birth until today, with the sole setback of 1948. It’s as if he’d taken the crudest anti-colonialist and anti-imperialist critiques of Israel – in which every misdeed in the history of Zionism is a predetermined consequence of Zionism tout court – and inverted them. In every case except 1948, the connections between Zionist ideologies and Israeli actions towards Palestinians, particularly those who hold Israeli citizenship, are minimised.

Shavit is right to make the point that Arabs weren’t just passive victims. Many of Israel’s actions have been driven by a very real sense of threat caused by Arab antagonism: the 1929 Hebron massacre, the support of Nazi Germany by the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem, the anti-Semitism pervasive in Arab propaganda, the numerous military attacks against Israel, the suicide bombings of civilians in Israeli cities during the second intifada. But Shavit does his defence a disservice by obfuscating so much. His telling of Israel’s story after the war glosses over or entirely omits some inconvenient facts. In the years after the armistice, as Shapira, Morris and other historians have recounted, several thousand of the 750,000 Palestinians expelled from their homes were shot and killed when they tried to sneak back home under cover of darkness; Israel destroyed, expropriated and tried to erase signs of past life in former Palestinian villages, including those where Israel’s 75,000 internally displaced Palestinian

citizens had lived; and between 1949 and 1956 tens of thousands of Palestinians, including residents of present-day Ashkelon and Bedouin in the north and the Negev, were encouraged to leave or forcibly displaced to Sinai, Gaza, Syria and elsewhere.

Shavit doesn't mention that Israel's prime minister approved plans in the early 1950s to transfer thousands of Christian Arabs to Argentina and Brazil, or that it imposed military government on its Arab citizens until the end of 1966, denied them access to the Israeli judicial system, censored their press, and restricted their movement. For Shavit, 'the Israel of the 1950s was a just social democracy', one of 'the most egalitarian ... in the world'.

Shavit ignores the state's accelerated settlement project after the 1948 war, which restricted the growth of Arab villages, expropriated their lands and surrounded them with new settlements that were intended, in the words of government officials, to 'Judaize' the Arab-inhabited areas and borderlands. And he disregards the fact that after the 1967 conquest of the West Bank, Gaza, Sinai and the Golan, it was Israel's Laborite leaders and leading intellectuals – not religious zealots – who pushed for territorial expansion.

Most glaringly, Shavit doesn't explore the continuities between Israeli actions in 1948 and current policies: the restrictions on the sale and lease of land to Arabs; the punishment of Israeli organisations that commemorate the Nakba, the Palestinian 'catastrophe' of 1948; the World Zionist Organisation's Settlement Division's plans to 'Judaize Galilee' and expand Jewish territorial contiguity into areas inhabited by Palestinian citizens of Israel. Each week the newspapers describe the struggle to strengthen Israel's Jewish character at the expense of its Palestinian citizens, yet in Shavit's account it's as though the 1948 war was the last time Israel curtailed the rights of the quarter of the country that isn't Jewish.

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Shavit's book was written for an American audience, in English not Hebrew, and has received more praise from American Jews than any other book on Israel published in the past decade. The director of the Anti-Defamation League, Abraham Foxman, *Atlantic* correspondent Jeffrey Goldberg and *New Republic* editor Franklin Foer offered gushing blurbs for the book, as did the former Israeli prime minister Ehud Barak. It received the Natan Book Award, a new prize that funds publicity, marketing and distribution for the winning titles. The American Israel Public Affairs Committee had its staff distribute copies of the book to youth activists. Thomas Friedman and David Brooks both dedicated a laudatory *New York Times* column to it. The *New Yorker* editor David Remnick, whom Shavit describes as his book's 'godfather', has spoken on multiple panels to publicise the book, which he helped edit, extracted in his magazine, and called 'the most extraordinary book' on Israel in decades and 'an argument for liberal Zionism'. In a panegyric in the *New York Times Book Review*, Leon Wieseltier, the literary editor of the *New Republic*, described it as 'a Zionist book unblinkered by Zionism'.

Opinion polls suggest that most American Jews identify themselves as liberals and Democrats and feel affection for Israel. Many dislike the suggestion that there is any tension

between their commitment to liberalism and their Zionism. Shavit's ultimately uplifting tale, his celebration of Israel, tells American liberal Jews that there is not. His display of mournful soul-searching about Lydda allows him and his readers to feel good about feeling bad. He can tell Palestinian refugees to get over it, while shedding a tear himself. As he admonished a hypothetical Palestinian interlocutor on National Public Radio, 'I acknowledge Lydda, but you must not get addicted to Lydda. You have to leave that behind.' Palestinians are told to forget their history, and in the same interview Jews are told to remember theirs: 'We've lost this basic understanding that we are the ultimate victims of the 20th century.'

Shavit's emphasis on the tragic inevitability of Israel's predicament reassures his readers that they can absolve the country from its past wrongdoing – what happened was, after all, unavoidable – and that there is little Israel or its advocates can do today to make up for it. He chastises the left for failing to acknowledge the centrality of the refugee issue, but not because he thinks the refugees' needs must be addressed. Shavit, like Israeli officials, is unwilling to consider the return of significant numbers of Palestinians. In short, he justifies inaction, but cloaks it in empathy.

At a discussion with Remnick, Shavit said he wouldn't 'condemn' those who perpetrated massacres in 1948:

SHAVIT: They [the perpetrators] complained about some Israeli bleeding-heart authors that are very well known. They said, 'We did the dirty work. They live on the land that we cleared for them, and then they [the bleeding hearts] say: 'These guys committed war crimes.' And that's a valid argument. Now I think it's very important to remember, and I said it to you on some other occasions, I mean, this country [the United States] is based on crimes that are much worse than Lydda, much worse than Lydda. I mean when I hear American liberals, Canadian liberals, Australian liberals and New Zealand liberals, their liberalism, and their universal values, are based on the fact [that] they basically murdered the other, and therefore they can criticise us –

REMNICK: What is the difference?

SHAVIT: A hundred years.

REMNICK: Exactly.

Not quite. Of course, Shavit is right that well over a hundred years before 1948 Native Americans suffered a much worse fate than the Palestinians, who were not killed in sufficient numbers to deprive them of their current numerical advantage over Israeli Jews. But that doesn't make the attention now paid to the plight of Palestinians hypocritical, or simply a result of Zionism emerging at a later time. It's hard to imagine an American commentator getting away with telling Native Americans that he refused to condemn past misdeeds, that Native American anguish was necessary for the greater good of America, and that it was the Native Americans' 'moral and reasonable obligation to overcome that trauma', as Shavit said to Charlie Rose about the expulsions and massacres of 1948.

Shavit offers American Jews a seemingly liberal Israeli voice with which many of them can identify – one that's neither too chauvinist, like sections of the Israeli right, nor too despairing and critical of Israel, like sections of the Israeli left. Inside Israel, however,

Shavit's views aren't considered liberal. In his columns he presents himself as the voice of the reasonable silent majority, and so his positions in recent years, though inconsistent, have followed the steadily rightward-moving centre, whose members include the more hawkish parts of Labor as well as Netanyahu and the more moderate elements of the Likud. Shavit is there to reassure the Israeli political consensus of its wisdom. As far back as 1997, he opposed the Oslo Agreement, calling it 'a collective act of messianic drunkenness' and defending its most prominent opponent, Netanyahu, against charges that he was partly to blame for its failure. During the Second Intifada, he praised Sharon for having 'conducted the military campaign patiently, wisely and calmly' and 'the diplomatic campaign with impressive talent'. In the final week of the war in Gaza this summer that took the lives of 72 Israelis and more than 2100 Palestinians, Shavit wrote that strong objection to Israeli conduct was illegitimate and amounted to anti-Semitic bigotry: 'We're a tiny minority nation under attack, and sweeping criticism of this nation is like sweeping criticism of the black, gay or Yazidi minority.' Shavit has been among the most prominent advocates of the view that there was and is 'no partner' for peace in the Palestinian leadership, claiming that Barak had 'offered the whole world to the Palestinians'. He says he supports an end to occupation but in the same breath says that this step is 'problematic' and 'liable to foment tidal waves of violence that will rock Israel and jeopardise its existence'. In 2006 he repeatedly attacked Olmert's plan to withdraw from large parts of the West Bank, and claimed during a panel discussion at the Council on Foreign Relations that a withdrawal even to the West Bank separation barrier, which would leave the vast majority of settlers on the Israeli side of the wall, would be a mistake. Shavit has often predicted an Iranian nuclear bomb or a military strike against Iran, making himself seem like a mouthpiece for Netanyahu. Today, in the West Bank, he advocates slow, cautious and gradual change while Israeli soldiers and bases remain in place – a version of Netanyahu's 'economic peace'. But in the United States all this is somehow packaged as liberalism.

