

A compelling insight into Israel's dilemmas

Ari Shavit's *My Promised Land* is a must-read, at times painful in its analysis, but nonetheless inspiring.

TO the writing of books about Israeli society, politics and “the conflict”, there is no end.

But when a prize-winning book about Israel wins high praise in the *New York Times*, *The Economist* and the *New Republic*; when eminent pro-Israel critics who disagree with the author nevertheless recommend it as a “must-read”; and when reviewers insist that it cannot be pigeon-holed easily as “left” or “right”, then attention must be paid. An extract from the book may convey its distinctive approach.

“If Israel does not retreat from the West Bank, it will be politically and morally doomed, but if it does retreat it might face an Iranian-backed and Islamic Brotherhood imposed West Bank regime whose missiles could endanger Israel's security.”

All too many of Israel's friends fall into one of two categories. They either agree with the sentence's first half, but ignore or wish away the second. Or they insist on the sentence's second half, but ignore the tragic truth about the occupation.

The extract is from Ari Shavit's *My Promised Land*, released in Australia this week. And the book's strength is that it grapples with tragic dilemmas for which there are no immediate answers. In that sense, *My Promised Land* is indeed special, and a “must-read”, provocatively so. Often painfully so.

Thus *My Promised Land* reminds anyone who cares about Israel that almost anything worthwhile to be said about the country's great issues, if it's to be truthful and not just spin, involves ambiguity – political, moral and personal. Most of us, most of the time, yearn for the unambiguous. From wherever we sit on the ideological spectrum. Which makes *My Promised Land* a difficult book, yet one which is hard to put down.

Ehud Barak has said Shavit is “brutally honest regarding the Zionist enterprise”, while also being “insightful, sensitive and attentive”. Daniel Gordis, himself a leading author about Israel's dilemmas (*Saving Israel*), said that the book was “without question one of the most important ... about Israel and Zionism that I have ever read”. And “both movingly inspiring and at times heartbreakingly painful”.

I chose Barak and Gordis to emphasise that while Shavit writes for Israel's left-wing *Haaretz*, he cannot be dismissed, as can some others, as just another alienated Israeli intellectual who blames only his own people and has only cynicism to offer. Shavit writes from within the Israeli family, fearful and concerned because it is his family. He speaks about “we”, not about “them”. Often he speaks harshly. But if you read the book to the end,

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and to do it justice you must, it is his love of Israel that resonates.

It is, however, a love of Israel experienced through the prism of a secular, university-educated, native-born, upper middle-class “sabra”, a member of one of the Israeli tribes which Shavit identifies as making up, however shakily, a fragmented Israeli society. The problem is that his vantage point focuses on what divides Israelis, rather than what connects them, which I believe is stronger than Shavit is willing, or able, to acknowledge. It is the force of 30 centuries of Jewish history, tradition and connection to the land of Israel. Not just the century since the birth of modern Zionism.

Shavit's telescoped and narrower view of the Zionist and Israeli enterprise leads him to conclude: “We have no coherent identity and no continuous past ... We respect no past and no future and no authority.” In this, Shavit may be speaking for an influential elite minority of Israelis, and some Diaspora Jews, but not for the majority of his compatriots.

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This doesn't mean that Shavit's accounts of Israeli history since 1948 are wrong. All too often they are right. But it is another way of saying that you can't read Shavit passively. His writing forces you to engage, disagree, argue. But you keep reading. That happens when Shavit tells it as he sees history. And when he reports on his own experiences, for example in a prison for Palestinians.

But I also argued with Shavit's “No Exit” existential despair about his country's future. He portrays it as potentially overwhelmed by threats, external and internal. But I would argue that Israel has faced worse threats, external and internal, and is today better placed to overcome them. Unfortunately, the despair – which Shavit softens at the end by his personal commitment to sticking it out in Israel, “lamrot hakol (despite everything)”, and come what may – tends somewhat to diminish this otherwise rich, arresting and multi-layered story about “the miracle” that Shavit describes so well.

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