

JEREMY VERSUS GOLIATH

J Street's Brave Effort to Promote Peace in the Middle East

By Scott MacLeod

A New Voice for Israel: Fighting for the Survival of the Jewish Nation.

By Jeremy Ben-Ami. Palgrave Macmillan, 2011. 242 pp.

Jeremy Ben-Ami has written a valuable book that should be read by everyone affected by the Israeli–Palestinian conflict—Israelis, Arabs and especially by Americans. The title may suggest to some that this is another volume of familiar pro-Israel boosterism. The author believes that Israel's existence is under threat and this is the focus of his effort. Yet, he has written a very different sort of book than we are used to seeing from Israel's die-hard supporters in America.

Part of *A New Voice for Israel* is an account of the deep roots of Ben-Ami's family in Israel. The book also serves as an insider's guide to J Street, the pro-Israel lobby group that Ben-Ami founded in 2008. In that aspect, he tells the story of a struggle under way for the soul of America's Jewish community, and J Street's role in it. At its core, Ben-Ami's book, like J Street's work, is a courageous effort to rewrite the Israel-driven narrative of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict that is too unquestioningly accepted and parroted in the West.

This is an impassioned plea for American Jews, U.S. politicians, and Israelis to get on the right side of history in the Middle East. Ben-Ami debunks the mythology about Israel's founding, embraces the need for a peace settlement that provides dignity and justice to the Palestinians, criticizes Israeli politics for undemocratic tendencies, and blasts Washington's uncritical support for Israeli policies. "The present path that the State of Israel is on is unsustainable," he writes. "The occupation of another people and denial of their national aspirations and their rights is not only morally unacceptable, it is a fatal threat to the entire enterprise of the State of Israel." Elsewhere Ben-Ami writes: "The unsustainability of the present course seems clear to just about everyone except the present Israeli government and some of the leadership of the American Jewish community."

The message is not a new one, of course. What makes it meaningful is a messenger who came to deliver it after honest self-reflection. His thinking is well in line with

dovish Israelis. Many American Jews agree with him, and some of them have joined or donated to J Street. But in the U.S., few figures in the political mainstream have been as brave as Ben-Ami in expressing strong and valid views critical of Israeli policies and of Israel's American supporters. We might wager that the boosterish title on the cover, which skirts any reference to the criticism found inside, was given in the hope of deflecting the backlash that books critical of Israel tend to ignite in the U.S. As he notes in the book, opponents of J Street call "my colleagues and me fanatics, anti-Semitic, extremists and self-hating Jews."

Ben-Ami is hardly any of those things, or even a political lefty. He spent a twenty-five-year career embedded in mainstream Democratic Party politics, starting in his hometown of New York City. He served as deputy domestic policy advisor in the White House during President Bill Clinton's first term in office.

Giving the author's critical views great poignancy and standing are Ben-Ami's deep family connections to the Zionist movement, the Holocaust, and Israel's war of independence. Both sets of his paternal great-grandparents were among the early Zionist settlers, arriving in Palestine in 1882 and 1891 respectively. His paternal grandparents, Menahem and Sara, were among the sixty-six Jewish families that founded Tel Aviv in 1909—and as a descendent Ben-Ami featured in the city's centennial celebrations two years ago. The family of Ben-Ami's

mother was in Austria as the *Anschluss* or German annexation approached. She fled to the United States, but countless relatives who did not escape perished cruelly in Nazi concentration camps.

Ben Ami's father, Yitshaq, was born in Tel Aviv in 1913, and grew up as the struggle for Palestine, involving Zionists, the Arab population, and the British Mandate authority, turned bloody with the outbreak of anti-Zionist rioting in the 1920s. He became a follower of Vladimir Jabotinsky and went on to play a leading role in the Revisionist Zionism movement. At nineteen, he joined Jabotinsky's Betar youth group, becoming commander of the Jerusalem branch, and eventually signed up for the Revisionist's underground militia, the Irgun Zvai Leumi. Revisionists believed that a Jewish state was essential and that violence was a necessary instrument to be used against Arabs and the British in achieving it. The Irgun, led by Menachem Begin, who would later start the hard-line Likud party and serve as prime minister of Israel, was a terrorist group blamed for atrocities such as the Deir Yassin massacre and the bombing of the British military headquarters at the King David Hotel in Jerusalem. In 1937, Yitshaq went to Vienna to run the Irgun's illegal immigration efforts, and two years later he arrived in New York on a mission to alert American Jews to the Nazi threat to European Jewry.

Ben-Ami, born in 1962 and raised in New York, where his father had chosen to settle after Ben-Gurion crushed the

Irgun, obviously grew up in a different era and has found himself involved in another type of advocacy concerning Israel. Yisshaq remained a hard-liner until his death in 1984, the year his son graduated from Princeton University. At that time, Ben-Ami seemed broadly in sync with his father's views. He defended Israel's invasion of Lebanon in 1982, and reflexively complained about "media bias" against Israel. But he undertook a deep reevaluation of his views on Israel and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict while residing in Israel after serving in the Clinton administration. Having decided to reconnect with his family's roots, he enrolled in an intensive Hebrew language course and discovered that some of his classmates were Palestinians from Gaza.

The experience was an epiphany. "After thirty-five years of knowing little more than caricatures on which I had been raised," Ben-Ami writes, "I was now getting to know pharmacists and schoolteachers, fathers and sons, real people with real stories—and I opened a window into a history of which I had been totally unaware."

The Palestinians shared their stories of national catastrophe, displacement, and occupation in the wake of Zionism's great triumph. "As with so many young Jewish Americans being exposed to Israel in that era, I was thoroughly steeped in—and loved—the mythology of the State of Israel, its miraculous founding and the astonishing accomplishments of its brief history," Ben-Ami writes in a particularly

moving passage. "There was, however, one huge gap in my learning about the history and the culture of the region and the land. I never learned about the Palestinians. I knew them simply as the enemies of my people. Back then, we called them simply Arabs. My father and his friends were, to me, the true Palestinians. I understood that the Arabs had tried—more than once—to destroy Israel and make the Jews leave. But never once did I hear their side of history. Not one book in our house told their story. Not one class in Hebrew school exposed us to their culture, their backgrounds and lives."

By the time he returned to the U.S. after two years living in Israel, Ben-Ami says, "my perspective on Israel and the Middle East had been thoroughly altered." He was determined to put his new outlook in the service of Israeli-Palestinian peace. He would soon experience the serious disconnect between American policies in the Middle East and the realities in the region as he now understood them.

Back in the rough and tumble of American politics and working for Mark Green's mayoral campaign in New York in 2001, Ben-Ami was appalled when Green's charitable donation to Americans For Peace Now caused Green's opponent, a politician with connections to West Bank settlers, to question his candidate's pro-Israel credentials. Later, as the national policy director for Howard Dean's 2004 presidential bid, Ben-Ami was driven to similar outrage when opponents staged a furor over Dean's comment

that the U.S. should be ‘even-handed’ in the Arab–Israeli dispute. “These are but two minor examples of what happens every day, everywhere in the country, when American politicians interact with Israel’s most vocal supporters,” Ben-Ami explains. “Strip away the spin and the politics, and what was so terrible about what Dean said or what Green did?”

Those experiences and others led Ben-Ami to establish J Street as a ‘pro-Israel, pro-peace’ lobby group and political action committee based in Washington, DC. With the help of liberal Jewish philanthropists, including George Soros, Ben-Ami oversees an operational budget of nearly \$7 million and a staff of fifty in eight cities. In effect, J Street’s calling is to convince American Jews and the U.S. government to save Israel from itself. Ben-Ami believes that Israel’s continuing occupation of Palestinian territory, in a time of advances in weapons technology, religious polarization and unfavorable demographic trends, threatens the existence of the state of Israel. If Israel does not grant Palestinians voting rights, he suggests, Israel will face increasing international isolation over apartheid-style domination. Yet if it grants Palestinians the vote, eventually an Arab majority will override Israel’s Jewish character through democratic means. Failure to seize the opportunity for a ‘two-state solution,’ Ben-Ami argues, will see Israel “endure a fate of deeper and bloodier violence, deteriorating democracy and growing international isolation.” He derides the complacency of Israelis and Americans

alike who fail to see the urgency of addressing the existential crisis and believe that the conflict can be “managed.”

Like most groups of its kind, J Street raises money for and provides campaign backing to politicians running for seats in the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives, lobbies the Congress and American administration to support its outlook on the Middle East, and engages in nationwide grassroots organizing to promote its efforts. Ben-Ami believes that only the U.S. can persuade Israeli leaders to take a different, more sensible course. But American politicians fail to do so, he argues, because they are heavily influenced by “traditional pro-Israel lobbying groups” that “employ a powerful combination of political assistance for those who follow the line and a healthy dose of fear for those who don’t.” Ben-Ami points out that these groups also have an influence on the American Jewish community itself.

The answer, he believes, is to give a greater voice to moderate American Jews, who would in turn provide political cover for U.S. leaders to take a more critical approach to Israel, which in turn would push Israeli leaders to make greater efforts to negotiate the fair and just peace deal with Palestinians that Israelis require for their own long-term survival—or else face painful political consequences. Ben-Ami argues that peace is “a fundamental national interest of the United States,” and the lack of an agreement undermines U.S. security—by damaging American credibility and fueling Muslim extremism, for example.

Ben-Ami makes the case that with political will, a solution to the conflict can be found. Simply put, it would require an end to Israel's forty-four-year occupation of the West Bank and the establishment of an independent Palestinian state there and in the Gaza Strip. He is correct in pointing out that teams of Israeli and Palestinian negotiators have worked in public and in secret for nearly twenty years to greatly narrow the differences on the key issues of mutual borders, Palestinian refugees, Jewish settlers, and sovereignty in Jerusalem. The Oslo Accords of 1993, the Camp David Summit and Clinton Parameters of 2000, the Arab peace initiative of 2002, the Geneva Initiative of 2003, and the subsequent discussions between Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas collectively point to a historical 'end of conflict' agreement that would receive widespread international backing.

In his mission to save Israel, however, Ben-Ami is up against an American Goliath. As executive director of J Street, he presents an insider's account of how the influential pro-Israel lobby stifles debate and helps skew American policies for the Middle East. Among the 'traditional' groups he identifies are the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), the American Jewish Committee (AJP), the Anti-Defamation League (ADL)—and the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, itself an umbrella group of more than fifty Jewish organizations. They broadly

constitute a hard-line, right of center bloc that promotes unwavering support of Israeli policies—including the occupation of Palestinian territory or military operations against enemies—in the belief that an iron-clad U.S.-Israel alliance best ensures Israel's security and also serves American strategic interests.

He traces their power to a tradition from the early days of Israel when Jewish American leaders believed that the credibility of their minority community depended on speaking with a unified voice that brooked no dissent from within. The organizations, or otherwise their affiliates and individual members, raise money for political candidates and advocacy work, and have outreach branches to connect with local Jewish communities. They are supported by a well-funded network of think tanks, polling groups, media watchdogs, not to mention by allied right-wing groups representing 'Christian Zionists,' such as the John Hagee Ministries and Christians United For Israel.

Ben-Ami rejects exaggerations of the influence of these groups over U.S. foreign policy as a whole—a criticism of *The Israel Lobby*, the 2007 book targeted for venomous attacks by pro-Israel forces. But Ben-Ami agrees that the 'traditional' organizations have "masterfully written the chapter on Israel in the rulebook of American politics." It starts, he explains, when a politician first runs for office and is engaged by Jewish community representatives who provide position papers on the Middle East. "The talking points become

the basis for standard responses the candidate will memorize and fall back on for the rest of his or her political career,” Ben-Ami says. “After all, they know how important it is to their political future that they learn the proper way to be ‘pro-Israel’—meaning no criticism of Israeli policy, no vocal opposition to settlements and no talk of active American leadership to achieve a two-state deal.” Even candidates elected to local offices will often be invited by AIPAC or other groups to take an escorted trip to Israel for briefings on ‘security threats’ facing Israelis.

All of that is part of American democracy, which is notoriously encumbered by the disproportionate influence of ‘special interest’ groups, including those that promote the right to bear arms, the tobacco trade, and the concerns of retired citizens. But the tactics used by some pro-Israel hard-liners raise disturbing questions about intolerance and intimidation.

Ben-Ami reports on how pro-Israel donors seek to bar community institutions that they support from hosting programs or speakers they deem unacceptable. One example was in 2009 when the San Francisco Jewish Film Festival screened *Rachel*, a film about an American activist named Rachel Corrie, who was killed while protesting in front of an Israeli bulldozer in Gaza. After the screening, five festival board members resigned and financial backers withdrew their support. The local Jewish Federation declared that it would not henceforth fund programs that undermine “the

legitimacy of the State of Israel”—including through association with the Boycott, Disinvestment and Sanctions movement. Ben-Ami rejects such tactics as a form of prior restraint and guilt by association.

Ben-Ami goes so far as to compare the tactics to the McCarthyism of the 1950s, and he has regularly been on the receiving end of them. After Jeffrey Goldberg of the *Atlantic* (a mainstream monthly magazine) asked Ben-Ami to renounce the support of Stephen M. Walt, co-author of *The Israel Lobby*, Ben-Ami replied, “One of the reasons I won’t answer your call to quote-unquote renounce him is that it really smacks of witch-hunts and thought police.” Ben-Ami observes that many in the Jewish community throw up their hands and walk away in such an atmosphere. “The taunts, the funding threats and the guilt by association all add up to an undemocratic and un-Jewish pattern of limiting dissent,” he says.

An important part of J Street’s mission is to convince Washington policy makers that the traditional pro-Israel groups do not truly represent the views of the majority of American Jews and that their continuing influence is due mainly to their impressive coffers and organizational talents. Ben-Ami offers up polling data collected for J Street that supports the assertion. While a tiny minority of American Jews make Israel the central cause of their political lives, the vast majority do not primarily cast their votes on the basis of a candidate’s position on Israel. Another survey, in 2010, found

that 78 percent of Jewish Americans support a ‘two-state solution,’ and by a margin of 82 percent to 18 percent understand that such a solution is necessary to sustain Israeli’s security and Jewish and democratic character.

The polls belie the perception inside the Beltway that American Jews represent a “single-issue voting bloc that cares first and foremost about U.S. policy toward the State of Israel and the broader Middle East.” That perception, Ben-Ami complains, leads politicians to falsely believe that to win Jewish political and financial support, you have to be ‘pro-Israel,’ and the best way to show that is to “tack as far right politically as possible.” Ben-Ami is palpably aghast when he writes: “This political dynamic goes a long way toward explaining how the United States—the world’s sole superpower and the most generous patron of both parties to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict—is unable to find a way to end the conflict when both the need and the solution are so evident.”

The emergence of J Street is itself one of the signs of the struggle within America’s Jewish community over everything from Jewish political clout and the relationship of American Jews with the State of Israel, to the question of Jewish values. Ben-Ami reveals his deep angst over the latter when he argues that Israel’s occupation of the West Bank and blockade of Gaza should end, not simply because they undermine Israel’s security and U.S. national interests. “They should end

because they are morally wrong, and the treatment of the Palestinian people and the condition in which many of them live should trouble Jews, who, as a people, have themselves experienced far too much discrimination and mistreatment in their history,” he writes.

Ben-Ami bemoans the fact that “to raise these moral questions opens you to scathing attack and to being labeled as ‘virulently anti-Israel.’” He says that the nationalist obsession with strength and security is understandable, given the immense tragedies in Jewish history, but argues “strength and survival do not require sacrificing the moral core of what it means to be Jewish.”

Ben-Ami highlights a notable feature of the current communal struggle: disillusion and disenchantment among young Jewish Americans, who are growing up not on the heroic stories of Israel’s founding and spectacular military victories, but with constant headlines about Israel’s armed misadventures, human rights abuses, and international isolation. They are being turned off from organized Jewish life and its attachment to the state of Israel, Ben-Ami argues, partly because of the way traditional pro-Israel advocacy groups have shut off open discussion of the issues in favor of “a simple us-versus-them formulation that demands unquestioning support for Israel.” He cites the “seminal brief” by writer Peter Beinart in the *New York Review of Books* in 2010 “indicting the American Jewish establishment not just for rigid adherence to a

hawkish orthodoxy on Israel but for driving young, liberal American Jews away from Israel and from their community.”

Nonetheless, the awful record of the Obama administration on the Israeli–Palestinian conflict suggests that the ‘silent majority’ represented by J Street is far from having a significant impact on American policy. Despite Obama’s early pledges to make peacemaking a top priority, which Ben-Ami applauded as “clear from the start,” his administration ignominiously retreated in the face of resistance from Israel’s prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu. The leader of the hard-line Likud party, Netanyahu maintains strong support from the traditional pro-Israel groups as well as from Congress. Just how surreal Washington remains on the issue is illustrated by the fact that instead of focusing on Obama’s spinelessness, the conventional wisdom inside the Beltway questions the president for having pressured Israel in the first place. Obama initially enjoyed a high standing in the Arab world, but his popularity plunged still further recently when his administration moved to block a Palestinian diplomatic effort to receive United Nations recognition of Palestinian statehood. Writing more than two years into Obama’s term of office, Ben-Ami accurately states that the peace process is in “shambles.”

J Street’s support for Obama’s rejection of Palestinian UN membership perhaps reflects the continuing influence of the traditional pro-Israel groups like AIPAC;

J Street, it seems, is anxious not to veer too far from the American Jewish establishment so as to nurture its mainstream credentials in the face of harsh questioning of its political orientation. J Street has, however, strongly opposed punitive moves to cut off U.S. aid to the Palestinian Authority. It also opposed plans to withdraw U.S. funding of the United Nations Economic, Scientific, and Cultural Organization after member states voted to grant membership to Palestinians.

The work of J Street is vital as a new era dawns in the Middle East. The hard-line policies of Netanyahu’s government have further deepened Israel’s isolation in the region and the world. Obama’s acquiescence to them has undermined whatever little Arab faith remained in American moral leadership. The Israeli and American leaders at times seem clueless about the shift in Arab foreign policy—to one that is more independent, nationalistic, reflecting popular sentiment, and critical of the U.S. and Israel—that is inevitable after the Arab Spring. The ever-looming showdown over Iran’s nuclear program is a constant reminder of how dangerous things can still get in the Middle East and why sound American policymaking is critical for the security of everyone in the region.

J Street has made a start. *A New Voice for Israel*, as with J Street’s lobbying efforts, is helping rewrite the narrative of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. That is a task of profound importance. It will take time and won’t be easy. But in that effort, Ben-Ami is an honorable voice.