

**PATRICK COSGRAVE**

**The origins, evolution  
and future  
of Israeli foreign policy**

**THE SIXTH SACKS LECTURE**

**OXFORD CENTRE FOR  
POSTGRADUATE HEBREW STUDIES  
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The British tradition of diplomacy — and, for that matter, the British tradition of diplomatic history — stresses above all the concept of *raison d'état* in foreign policy. True, we have over the centuries developed a highly sophisticated, and supposedly almost scientifically objective, method of explaining relations between states through the use of the concept of the balance of power. It may be argued, of course, that, with our accession to the European Economic Community, and with such developments as the withdrawal, under the Labour government, of our Ambassador to Chile on the grounds that the Pinochet government was a tyranny, both of these traditions have run to seed. They will, however, for a long time to come powerfully influence, even if they do not dominate, the way we think about foreign policy and the way we look at problems in diplomacy. I do not want, on this occasion, to develop too lengthy an analysis of the two concepts. Since I do, however, want to make a contrast between the Israeli and the British experience in this field, it will be useful, I think, at the outset to make a few general observations.

The doctrine of *raison d'état* (or, as the great German historian and theorist Meinecke sometimes called it, “Machiavellism”) sanctions, at its extreme, the performance of any act that may be deemed to be for the good of the state. The idea of the balance of power is infinitely more complex, but it will suffice for the moment to say that it has both a normative and an objective meaning. That is to say, those interested in the matter tend to believe that a balance (preferably a complex one, involving many states in different relations to one another) between powers tends to the avoidance of conflict and the preservation of peace; and they tend to

believe, further, that there is a natural tendency in the international system to move towards balance, so that the concept of the balance of power is a useful tool for explaining international relations. You will even find, in F.H. Hinsley's brilliant essay, "Reflections on the history of international relations",\* the proposition stated that as the European nations in particular grew in their sophistication over the period since the seventeenth century, and developed their understanding, within a decidedly nationalistic framework, of how the balance of power worked, the incidences of conflict between them became fewer — even if, because of the technological development of the modern state, Europe's wars became fiercer and more destructive.

Now, I do not want to suggest that these perceptions of the nature of the international order are exclusively British: the French and the Germans have from time to time acted on similar perceptions, the French most notably and brilliantly during the period of rule of General de Gaulle. But, not least because of Britain's repeated willingness throughout modern history to side first with one European grouping and then with another in order to prevent the emergence on the European continent of a single dominant power, we have become thought of, rightly, as the arch exponents of the idea of the balance of power. Further, because of the way in which we have so frequently gone to war in order to preserve or redress that balance we have come, until recently, to think it best for Europe when Britain holds the balance. And our equating the idea of Britain holding

\* In Martin Gilbert (ed), *A century of conflict* (London 1966).

the balance with the objective idea of European good has, naturally, led to our different continental rivals thinking of us as hypocritical, as *perfide Albion*.

There are no sentiments, therefore, there are only interests, in the classical British view of diplomacy. In the most familiar formulation — and, again, until recently — we always recognise and deal with the ascendant or governing elements in any country: their domestic policy is judged irrelevant to us. Again, unless they constitute a direct threat to our own interests, we do not attend either to the nature or to the ambitions of foreign powers. When during the 'thirties Churchill was fighting to warn his fellow countrymen against the dangers of a resurgent Germany, one of his most unacceptable propositions was that there was a distinct and intimate relationship between the domestic polity of Nazism and the international threat posed by Hitler. For, whatever a British politician engaged in foreign affairs might think privately of Nazism (and Chamberlain, in this regard at least a practitioner of classical British diplomacy, despised the creed) he could not see that those thoughts had any bearing on the conduct of diplomacy. Yet again, when after the war Britain conducted in the Middle East a policy distinctly hostile to the emerging state of Israel, while it was true that there was a good deal of purely sentimental Arabism abroad in the Foreign Office, the key consideration was the danger an espousal of Israel would pose to our relations with the Arab powers, particularly as we were then seeking to construct what became the CENTO alliance to form a barrier across the path of Russia's southward march. Further back in time, of course, and again although there was a good deal of sentimental Zionism in British ruling circles, the advantage of an Israeli state eternally grateful to Britain (and

perhaps even a member of the British Commonwealth) was seen in the fact that it could become a barrier to the thrust of French ambitions.

To a greater or lesser extent every British student of international relations is influenced by this historically conditioned way of thinking. It is a cardinal part of my thesis tonight, however, that the classical approach is a very inadequate method of understanding the nature and direction of Israeli foreign policy. But I will argue further that, particularly in the period after the Israeli-Egyptian peace treaty, Israel, considered as a *de facto* ally, satisfies all the classical requirements to an even greater extent than did the growing *yishuv* in the high period of British Zionism, the years after the Balfour Declaration.

I have mentioned one weakness of the classical approach to the analysis of foreign policy. That is its coldness in approaching the question of the relevance of a domestic polity to the conduct of another country's external policy. There is a further and larger point here. What one might call, in the broadest sense, the cultural dimension is missing from the British view of foreign policy. Long experience of the Americans in two world wars has taught us that they are prone to lurches of idealism and likely to succumb to the temptation to use their wealth and their muscle to make other nations and systems over into their own image. But we regard the Americans as different, because of this missionary element in their attitude to policy. Again, though experience has hardened us to it, we still find it difficult to grasp the outlook of the black African leaders arrayed against Rhodesia and South Africa. What does it matter to the ruler of Zambia — this is our unspoken assumption — what Pretoria does to the Zulus in South Africa? And, of course, we breathed a sigh of relief when, with an



“Egypt first” policy, President Sadat moved towards an accommodation with Israel: according to our lights Egypt was behaving sensibly at last, for it is a cardinal assumption of British diplomacy, battered though it has been by time, that all other nations act or want to act in the same way and on the same basis of thought as ourselves. Of course, Dr Owen has recently, and in a rather half-hearted and inconsistent way, tried to shift British attitudes towards a greater concern with the now fashionable subject of human rights, But the broad and underlying tide of *Realpolitik* thinking in British foreign policy has been scarcely interrupted, and under a Conservative government we can expect it to flow unchecked, except in the case of Soviet Russia where Mrs Thatcher’s perception of the relationship between the domestic system and the foreign potential of that power is the same as that of Churchill’s in relation to Nazi Germany.

But, in its origins and character at least Israeli foreign policy does not present to the student this ordered and somewhat mechanistic picture of how the world works. It is thus peculiarly resistant to the British method of analysis; and the resistance it offers is, it seems to me, one of the many reasons why the executants of British diplomacy have in general found it exceptionally difficult to enter into diplomatic intimacy with the governments of Israel. The first and essential thing to grasp about the wellsprings of Israeli policy, therefore, is the extent to which it is unique. And its uniqueness lies in its Jewishness and its spirituality: I can already hear the groans of many of my old teachers in diplomatic history, though not, I believe, from the greatest of them, Sir Herbert Butterfield, at my daring to advert to such emotional intangibilities. But it is true all the same.

These two elements, of course, themselves take their origins from the long exile of the Jewish people and are formed and moulded by their efforts to sustain their separate identity over so many years. In *Numbers* 23:9 we read, "lo, the people shall dwell alone and shall not be reckoned among the nations". S. Y. Agnon has told us, "I was born in Buczacz, but only in a dream; in reality I was born in Jerusalem and exiled by Titus." And the *Mekhilta*, the Midrashic commentary on *Exodus*, laid it down two thousand years ago that "The Jew can leave his own people, but he can never become integrally or spiritually part of any other." And — to come down from the clouds of hermeneutics to the rough and everyday world of political humour — I would remind you of the story told by the great Israeli religious thinker and diplomat, the late Yaacov Herzog, about a visit paid by his father to Washington in 1941. Knowing that Rommel was at the gates of Palestine, Roosevelt advised Rabbi Herzog to put off his planned return to his country. The Rabbi replied that, while the Prophets had foretold two destructions of the Temple, they had not foretold a third. That was natural, unforced, an expression of the faith in themselves that the Jews now established in Israel have, and which is an important — a vital — thing for anybody dealing diplomatically with them to bear in mind.

I want to dwell on Herzog's conception of the difference of Israel from the rest of the world for a little longer, for it is essential to any true understanding of the place Israel occupies on the international stage, and hence to a true understanding not only of what she is doing in diplomacy today but what she is likely to do in the future. Alas, Herzog left little in the way of a literary heritage — really, only one volume of essays\* — else we might be far better equipped to understand the complex phenomenon

we are discussing tonight. In one of his essays, however — “The meaning of Israel’s resurgence” — he relates a discussion he had on the subject with Raymond Aron. Aron had argued that, while Israel was born in the context and climate of twentieth century ideas about liberty, independence and nationalism, her existence was in flagrant contradiction to the same context and climate in respect of the Palestinian Arabs, and to Aron this “one fundamental question” itself raised the issue of whether Israel had a right to exist.

Now, seven years previously Herzog had argued just this issue out with Arnold Toynbee, in their famous debate at McGill University in Montreal. In his reply to Aron, however, he spelt out very clearly two elements in his political and diplomatic thinking which seem to me to be crucial to his view of the world and crucial as well to our understanding of Israel’s place in the world. I propose to quote these views at some length. Interestingly, the first is a serious, even a radical, criticism of classical Zionism — that is, Weizmann’s Zionism. “It was classic Zionism”, Herzog says,

in fact, basically, political Zionism — that established the state of Israel, but I believe that it never grasped two fundamental problems. It understood neither the Jewish people nor the Arabs. When you read the speeches of the Zionist leadership in 1917-18 and in the 1920s, you find that they really thought that we would return here along an ordinary twentieth century road. Scores of peoples had started to get some kind of independence after World

\* Misha Louvick (ed), *A People that dwells alone* speeches and writings of Yaacov Herzog (London 1975)

War One and we too would win independence here. The world would recognise this independence, and we would become a normal people, liberated from the burden of exile, accepted all over the globe.

In what respect was this reading of events wrong? The reply is Herzog's second point:

It was the belief of political Zionism that the idea of a "people that dwells alone" is an abnormal concept, when actually the concept of "a people that dwells alone" is the natural concept of the Jewish people. That is why today, twenty years after independence, this one phrase still describes the totality of this tremendous phenomenon, which has startled the whole world. If one asks how this ingathering of the exiles, which no one could have visualized in his wildest dreams, or how the State of Israel has endured such fundamental trials in the field of security, or how it has built up a flourishing economy, or how the unity of the Jewish people has been preserved throughout the Diaspora, in the final analysis one must come back to the idea that this is "a people that dwells alone".

"We have lived with loneliness throughout history", Herzog wrote elsewhere, "and we are masters of survival. We will not crawl before it, no matter how unpleasant it becomes." Elsewhere again he defines the two aims of Israeli foreign policy as "survival and acceptance." And, indeed, I remember, a couple of years ago, a senior Israeli diplomat saying to me, "We have no foreign policy except survival." That was not, of course, quite true. During the period of her advance in Africa, before Arab pressure

brought down the diplomatic house Israel had so carefully and painfully constructed, she had an elaborate and highly complex foreign policy. But the very brevity of its existence demonstrates Herzog's and my friend's point: the limitations on Israeli diplomacy are severe, and the scope for creativity small.

It is not necessary to go all the way — or even any of the way — with Herzog's mysticism (as, he tells us, Arnold Toynbee called it) to see the essence of this idea of aloneness not only to Israel's international position but to the strength with which she holds to what she is, which strength is a hard and fundamental fact to be faced by anybody dealing with her. When Mr Begin, in the early and exploratory stages of the peace talks with Egypt carefully and firmly asserted that Israel had an absolute right to Judea and Samaria but that, in the interests of peace, she would be willing to yield that right he was engaging in no mere essay in Talmudic pedantry: he was both asserting and yielding on a point integral to Israel's concept of herself. Likewise, it would naturally be political suicide for any Israeli government to yield sovereignty over Jerusalem, but this is not just because it would thereby be yielding a conquest: it is, rather, because of the special relationship between the Jews and the City. The extra strength of that feeling, I repeat, is a hard political fact in modern diplomacy. It would give Israel the strength to stand out against the most ferocious pressure; and it is therefore an idea that must enter the mind of the most pragmatic of diplomats. Israel will not do *anything* for the sake of a peace.

But I want, in discussing the evolution of Israeli foreign policy, to examine the experience of aloneness in a pragmatic context. As you know, as the Zionist movement came closer and closer to the realisation of the ideal of

statehood, there were numerous and often fierce discussions about the direction its future foreign policy should take. Of course, during the First World War, Weizmann and his friends had swung world Zionism against the Germans and towards the Allies, an achievement not without opposition. There had been, again, quite some thought given to the idea of Israel as, eventually, a member of the British Commonwealth, and perhaps even a Dominion. But perhaps one of the strongest strands in Israeli opinion in the period leading up to independence was that suggesting that the new state would be neutral, as became the ideal of an unusual and distinctive nation. Of course, the socialism of many of the founders of the *yishuv* encouraged that strand of thought: it was not easy for them immediately to identify with capitalist America and, if Britain was Socialist she was still intensely hostile. I mention the neutralist tinge in Zionism at that time, not because it was to persist, but because it was, if you like, a preface to the theory of non-alignment that for so long dominated and still influences Third World politics. And the fact that it did exist suggests a strong awareness of that concept of separateness, or aloneness on which Herzog dilated.

The clear and immediate evidence — after 1948 — that, even if survival was attainable, acceptance was not, led Israel into quite other paths; and it is in tracing the outline of those paths that we can see a confluence between the idea of aloneness and the pressures of the real world of states — the world, if you like, according to the traditions of British diplomacy and diplomatic historiography.

To put it bluntly, there has never been a time in Israel's short history when she had an ally she could wholly rely on. It is a striking, and in many respects delightful, fact that the first real political treaty Israel has signed is with

an Arab country, Egypt. For all her closeness at different times to Britain, France and the United States, she has never formally enjoyed a political agreement with any of them. In that sense she has most definitely stood alone.

Now, and understandably, an Arabist commentator might well scoff at that assertion. The United States has sustained Israel with loans that are more than substantial. The Israeli arms industry has often seemed a mere offshoot of the American. American Jewry is the most highly organised — one might say mobilised — in the world; and its substantial weight has almost invariably been ranged on the side of the little Mediterranean Jewish state. Had it not been for a massive injection of American arms and equipment during the Yom Kippur war Israel might well have gone under.

I do not dispute any of this. I would observe, though, that in the real world there is almost no state, perhaps not even the American or the Russian, that can truly stand alone in war. And, while it is certainly true that the existence and the goodwill of substantial Jewish communities in the Diaspora has been of great moment to Israeli governments at different critical moments of the country's history, it has ever been an understanding on the part of Israeli politicians that they have a right to such support. In their reading of things the Jewish people *are* the state of Israel. (The only other state to make such an assertion about its race is China.) And if this has from time to time caused difficulties of conscience and even of identity for Diaspora Jews it has been possible for most of them most of the time to live with it, not least because they have found, or claimed to find, an identity of interest between Israel and their countries of birth, adoption or assimilation. That, again, is a practical fact of political life, even if it arises from the specifically Jewish or speci-

fically spiritual understanding of international politics that I mentioned earlier. And I need hardly say that, at least in the democratic countries, it is the perfect right of a citizen Jewish by race to express support for Israel within his own polity just as he wishes.

No: it is not the occasional or even frequent support of Israel in her difficulties by other powers that is the crucial factor we have to consider. It is, rather, the ultimate unreliability of that support, at least as demonstrated by the Israeli experience. It is hardly necessary, in Britain, to remind an audience of the decision by Mr Heath's government in 1973 to renege on solemnly undertaken agreements regarding military supplies when Israel was facing her most dangerous moment; nor even to advert to the fact that the British government of the day refused landing rights to the aircraft of her closest ally, the United States, flying supplies to Israel. The reversal of friendship earlier undertaken by General de Gaulle was both more brutal and more thoroughgoing; and it was, perhaps, a greater shock. It happened, nonetheless.

And even the Americans, as represented by successive governments, have hardly been as steadfast as Israeli sentiment would like, or as Arab propaganda would have it. It is now known how close run a thing it was, whether the United States would recognise the infant state — which might, indeed, so Yigael Yadin says, not have been proclaimed had it not been for the determination of David Ben Gurion. After the 1956 campaign, again, the Eisenhower administration could scarcely have been less friendly to Israel. They insisted, of course, that the British, the French and the Israeli efforts should all be regarded in every sense as one, with the same purpose and objective. To the Israelis, of course, the situation looked very different. To them it was a heaven-sent opportunity



that France and Britain had their own reasons for fighting a battle with President Nasser's Egypt. But, as we have ample testimony to show, the Israeli representatives at tripartite negotiations before the beginning of the war were exceptionally uneasy about the secrecy of the collaboration that was to mark the whole campaign; and particularly uneasy about the vacillation and almost disgust at the whole enterprise that marked the attitude of the British Foreign Secretary, the late Selwyn Lloyd. Of this Mr Dayan has given a most vivid picture in his memoirs.

But the fact of the matter was that Israel had very good reasons of her own for embarking on the Sinai campaign. She did not do so, for example, in the spirit of a comradeship or alliance with Western interests. She was, above all, concerned about how she could end the deprivations of Egyptian-backed terrorist forces from the Sinai and Gaza. It was adventitious, fortuitous, that Britain and France were contemplating action to secure international control of the Suez Canal, and to humble President Nasser. For all the long-standing friendship between France and Israel the crucial point about the tripartite alliance was that it was an alliance of convenience. And the Israelis were, naturally, embittered when, the campaign being over, the Americans refused to recognise that the Israeli government had an entirely different set of grievances from the British and the French; or that their settlement with Egypt should be of an entirely different character, and should not partake of the colour of surrender, as the British and French allowed. Again, and in every aspect of this affair, we see the theme of aloneness.

And it is that theme, again, that has surfaced over and over during the recent peace negotiations. It can hardly be said that there is any substantial body of American

opinion keen on the idea that the Israeli clamour for secure borders, particularly in the face of a possible Egyptian change of front (perhaps following the death or supersession of President Sadat), should be met by an American guarantee. Nonetheless, serious consideration has been given to the matter, even so far as to the deployment of substantial US forces between the former belligerents. The fullest essay on this subject that I have read was produced by the Washington Centre for Strategic and International Studies, and it reached a negative conclusion. The fact of the matter, of course, is that, even if the Americans were willing to undertake such a deployment, Israel would be unhappy about it: the lessons of aloneness have sunk in. I need hardly add that, after the events of 1967, when the late U Thant withdrew his troops at the behest of President Nasser, no Israeli government could contemplate acceptance of a UN guarantee.

The position of the makers of Israeli foreign policy over the years, and now, is, therefore, this. They naturally seek for allies wherever and whenever they can find them. They make prodigious efforts to influence public opinion, particularly in the West. But their ultimate policy, and their ultimate strategy, is based solely on and within themselves. It is that crucial consideration that dominates Israeli attitudes to the Palestinian Arab problem. Of course there are Israelis who seek continued dominance on the West Bank. Then, again, there are those with a simple loathing for the Palestine Liberation Organisation. But the fundamental fact — reverting again to the twin aims of survival and acceptance — is that no other Arab power (save Egypt) is prepared to recognise the right of Israel to exist, the PLO least of all. In such circumstances the Israelis will not put survival at risk in order to gain a theoretical, and perhaps hypocritical,

acceptance. And given their experience of being alone, and their experience of the unreliability of friends, they are unlikely to make any further advance on the delayed action autonomy plan that Mr Begin has put forward, whatever the pressures. Nor — and here we are in the world of pragmatic diplomatic and military considerations — would they be well advised to do so.

What, then, of the future? It seems to me that, important as the Israeli-Egyptian treaty is, it is less important than other things that have been happening in the Middle East. The treaty itself has hardened rather than softened Arab opposition to Israel: today even Saudi Arabia and Morocco are among the rejectionists. Driven out of Egypt by President Sadat, accompanied by a triumphal American chorus, the Russians have dug themselves in in South Yemen and Syria. They are undoubtedly pleased with the disruption in Iran and Turkey. The fact of the matter is that a collar of steel is being constructed around Israel and Egypt alike, and there is no doubt in my mind that, over the last few years, the Soviet Union has had by far the best of things in the Middle East.

However, paradoxically, given the emphasis that I have placed on Israel's experience of aloneness, there may be coming a time of greater intimacy between Israel and the West. With the log jam broken it is not inconceivable that Israel and Egypt will find themselves standing together against intrusions into their region. Slowly, the Western nations are awakening to the threat the Russian drive in the Middle East and Africa poses to their interests. If the Egyptian-Israeli agreement can be made to work to the advantage of both sides, and particularly of Egypt, then the Western countries may begin to realise, given the anarchy in Iran and the possibility of similar developments elsewhere, the advantage of having

on their side the supreme Middle Eastern military power, a power stable because democratic and strong, not just because of the hardware it possesses and the fighting ability of its soldiers, but strong because of all the characteristics that have gone to make up the aloneness which I have stressed so often this evening.

I began by suggesting that the pragmatic traditions of Western, and particularly of British, foreign policy were precisely what made it hard to grasp the uniqueness of the Israeli experience, and the uniqueness of Israel's policy stance. But it is that experience, and that stance, that more than anything else — more than her shifting and changing friendships, more even than her successful wars — have made Israeli survival possible. There were moments during the recent negotiations when I felt that, blind to all but the most immediate concerns, the Carter administration were putting such pressure on Israel as would seriously weaken her in the years ahead. I am not, even now, altogether satisfied that that has not happened. But at least it has not obviously happened, and the fact of the matter now is that the West has a powerful *de facto* ally in the most turbulent and critical part of the world, an ally who holds the balance of power in the region, without being able to, or wanting to, dominate it.

The emergence of this ally from a desert with a population made up to a large extent from the beaten, the harried, the persecuted Jewish race is perhaps the predominant miracle of our age. Israel might have been strangled at birth, if not by Arab armies then by British hostility and American inaction. But she has survived and prospered, and she has gained her first measure of acceptance in her own region. There is little that even a hostile West could now do to bring her down. But the fact is that she has achieved her position along paths and by

methods and with an inspiration entirely different from any the traditions of foreign policy and diplomacy as we understand them might have suggested to us. It is fair to say, therefore, that, even if we have followed the progress of Israel with admiration (as probably most of us have), we have also watched it with a substantial measure of incomprehension.

Now, however, just as the interests of the West and the interests of Israel coincide more readily than at any previous time it behoves us, not to sit back and dismiss to the other side of our minds the differences Israel represents in the history of international relations, but to concentrate on the differences, on the uniqueness of the Israeli spirit and the Israeli performance. Here we have a nation made of nothing but a great people — for there was nothing in the desert they came to — which has achieved in spite of being alone, and perhaps through being alone, both an independence and a power that could not, fifty years ago, be imagined even by the wildest of dreaming Zionists. It is a nation, moreover, that fortune and circumstances have brought into the Western system of nations, sharing our fears, sharing our dreams, guarding our interests against the colossus to her north and that colossus's clients. For all the difficulties that lie ahead, therefore, it seems to me right to say, especially given both the collar of steel and evident Soviet ambition, that the principal Western *raison d'état* is to preserve the strength and independence of the State of Israel and ensure that she continues to hold the balance of power. There could be no steadier or worthier custodian.





