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## ISRAELIS VERSUS JEWS

*Bibi: The Turbulent Life and Times of Benjamin Netanyahu*, by Anshel Pfeffer.  
Basic Books, 432 pages, \$32



**A**FTER THE ASSASSINATION OF HIS Labor Party colleague Yitzhak Rabin in November 1995, Shimon Peres became acting prime minister of Israel. He called for early elections in hopes of gaining a mandate for advancing the peace process and, as initial exit polls indicated, was favored to win the general contest. Yet, by a margin of less than 1% of the total votes cast, the conservative Likud Party challenger, Benjamin Netanyahu, triumphed in the country's first direct election for prime minister. Although Peres had handily captured secular middle-class places like Tel Aviv, Netanyahu dominated throughout the country's heartland. "The Jews," grumbled Peres, "had beaten the Israelis."

By "Israelis," Peres meant his fellow partisans of Labor Zionism, the movement that inspired the creation of the socialist Mapai Party in 1930 and controlled Israel for its first 29 years. "Jews," on the other hand, were followers of Revisionist Zionism, founded by Russian poet Ze'ev Jabotinsky, which gave birth to Likud in 1973 and wrested power from Labor for the first time in 1977, nearly three decades after Israel's founding.

Although Anshel Pfeffer's *Bibi* is the newest biography of Netanyahu—the title comes from his nickname—it is essentially a history of modern Israel told as a bitter battle between two rival factions over control of the Jewish state and, even more so, over the guiding principles of its people. Notwithstanding Netanyahu's recent political successes, Revisionists have tended to see themselves, as Pfeffer notes, as "perpetual outsiders" and "true democrats." In practical terms, they were "convinced that security could only be achieved through eternal vigilance and deterrence" while their Labor adversaries "believed that only peace with the Arabs would guarantee long-term security."

**P**FEFFER, THE ISRAEL CORRESPONDENT for the *Economist* and a senior correspondent and columnist for *Haaretz*—Israel's longest-running print newspaper and the country's leading platform for post-Zionism—fills page after page of his book with overheated rhetoric, controversial assertions, and petty accusations. He starts by presenting his subject "as embodying the triumph of the underdogs in the Zionist enterprise over the secular liberals who founded the nation."

This is whitewashing meant to make the Israeli Left seem nobler than it was. Very few who were secular were also liberal while very few who were liberal were also secular. The genuinely "secular liberals" who were around then were General Zionists, supporters of Chaim Weizmann, and they later joined Likud. At the founding, Mapai was unapologetically socialist while Mapam, the second largest party after Mapai in the elections for the first Knesset in 1949, was Marxist and packed with veritable Stalinists. Pfeffer sneers that Netanyahu

has done little to find solutions to the conundrum of Israel's occupation of the Palestinians. Instead, he has done everything in his power to create a bubble in which the majority of Israelis believe they are enjoying a Western lifestyle and the benefits of democracy. A short drive away, their beloved army maintains its rule over a population not much smaller than their own, keeping out infiltrators who would seek to swamp the Jewish paradise.

Putting aside the term "occupation" (used by Israel's enemies and, alas, progressive Jews) and

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the laughable suggestion that Israelis are *not* blessed with “the benefits of democracy,” Bibi exquisitely, albeit inadvertently, demonstrates that elite antipathy for common citizens and their concerns is not merely an American or a European phenomenon. (The fear, by the way, is not of “infiltrators who would seek to swamp the Jewish paradise,” but of suicidal Islamists who thirst to murder Israelis.) The disdain raining down upon Netanyahu from the cultural heights is not unlike that hurled at the middle parts of England and America—which led to Brexit and President Donald J. Trump. Pfeffer rounds out the parallel by painting Bibi in Trumpian terms—yet Israel is one of the few countries that gives higher marks to Trump than to Barack Obama. Rather than indicting Netanyahu, Pfeffer is only offering additional reasons for the prime minister’s supporters to cheer him on.

**A**T DIFFERENT POINTS IN THE BIOGRAPHY, we’re told that Netanyahu is “impervious to criticism,” having evaded and shaken off a number of corruption investigations. He loathes elites and despises most media organizations, especially the *New York Times*. He is “obsessed with polls” and seized power only because he “stoked” the “deepest fears” of Israel’s outsiders (Haredim, settlers, Russian immigrants, and working-class, traditional Sephardim—all of whom feel snubbed by the Ashkenazi elites). And his “only accomplishment” for most of his career “was being a star TV pugilist.”

Pfeffer’s not done. His Netanyahu is lazy and suffers from attention deficit disorder, leaving jobs at Boston Consulting Group and a furniture company because “he lacked the drive and focus to endure.” He’s an extremist because he draws “every conflict into very stark sides of good and evil.” He’s a hypocrite for ordering bacon at breakfast while dining with religious friends. He’s spoiled because he requires chauffeurs and fine cuisine—and cheap because he leaves others to pick up the tab. He’s immature because he didn’t buy his first apartment until he was 41. The author concedes that Netanyahu is a skilled politician, but also calls him the “ultimate *hasbarist*” (propagandist).

At the root of all this bile is a form of xenophobia: disapproval of Netanyahu’s attachment to America. The prime minister is called a “chameleon” with a “chameleon-like ability to adopt an Israeli or American persona at will,” descriptions that eerily echo the old “wandering Jew” and “rootless cosmopolitan” stereotypes. Netanyahu’s grandfather and father both spent time in the United States, touring the country and making the case to Jewish audiences and politicians for the establishment of a Jewish state. Because his father

insisted that his children not receive a subpar education in socialist Israel, Netanyahu spent part of his childhood and adolescence in the U.S. He graduated from Cheltenham High School outside of Philadelphia and, after serving five years as a combat soldier in the Israel Defense Forces’ most elite special-forces unit, entered MIT to study architecture.

While there, he was handed a pro-Israel leaflet by a fellow student and became hooked on political activism. Shortly afterward, Boston’s Israeli consul sent then-25-year-old Bibi on his first official speaking gigs, which he aced. He served as deputy chief of mission at the Israeli Embassy in Washington from 1982 to 1984 and as Israeli ambassador to the United Nations from 1984 to 1988. In both stints, he cultivated relationships with diplomats, business leaders, and journalists, and became a media darling, regularly appearing on CNN and ABC’s *Nightline* with Ted Koppel, and earning favorable notices in the *New York Times*.

**P**FEFFER ATTRIBUTES NETANYAHU’S POLITICAL success to advantages, and a cut-throat ethic, that could only have come from (materialistic) America. “As much as Israel has changed over the decades,” the author comments, “it remains a much more egalitarian society than America. In this sense, Netanyahu is an American.” After all, he decried “the evils of socialism” while visiting friends on kibbutzim in the summers. He cherished Ayn Rand’s *The Fountainhead* and admired the novel’s entrepreneurial hero, Howard Roark. Netanyahu was formatively shaped by his time at Boston Consulting Group, “a company that not only dealt in...sweeping generalizations, but also rewarded the select few it hired with a handsome wage.” Unlike “the typical rumpiled and informal Israeli politician,” Netanyahu sported “crisp blue shirts” and carried an electric razor to eliminate his five o’clock shadow. He caught his opponents off guard by transforming Likud into “an election-campaigning machine” like the Republican and Democratic national committees. In the mid-2000s, he surrounded himself with bright Americans, like Ron Dermer (born and raised in Miami Beach), Ari Harow (from Los Angeles), and Naftali Bennett (born in Haifa but raised by Jewish-American immigrants).

“Just as he has spent decades creating a greatly exaggerated narrative of his grandfather, father, and older brother at the heart of the Zionist endeavor,” Pfeffer carps, “it seems Netanyahu must also place himself at the heart of Israel’s historic events.” But look at what he has achieved while in office: cutting taxes and social benefits, firing bureaucrats, privatizing state-owned industries, forcing banks to divest their pension division, phasing out fixed-inter-

est government bonds, improving relationships with Arab neighbors, developing new high-level international relationships (e.g., with India’s Narendra Modi and Japan’s Shinzo Abe), keeping the West Bank stable, preventing Hezbollah from penetrating the Golan Heights, and making Israel, for the first time, both water and energy independent. Not all these accomplishments are presented in the book, and those that make it are often offered abruptly and too close to the end to be treated substantively. It is noted, however—and commendably so because these facts refute common misperceptions—that Netanyahu has an “extreme aversion to risk and large-scale military adventures,” that Israel has experienced its lowest casualty rates under this prime minister, and that fewer new settler homes have been built in an average year in the West Bank than under any of his predecessors in the past three decades. Despite all that, we’re told that Netanyahu’s “ultimate legacy will not be a more secure nation, but a deeply fractured Israeli society, living behind walls.”

**I**NDEED, IT WOULDN’T BE A BOOK ABOUT ISRAEL by a left-leaning journalist if it didn’t all come back to “the occupation.” “Netanyahu has always maintained that the Palestinian issue is a diversion, not a central problem in the region,” writes Pfeffer. But is that wrong? There has perhaps never been less of an appetite for the immediate creation of a Palestinian state than there is today—among Arabs and Israelis alike. The entire region learned a painful lesson after Israel unilaterally withdrew from Gaza in 2005, dismantling all settlements. Hamas quickly turned the territory into a terror haven. It’s now widely believed that providing the Palestinians additional sovereignty over the West Bank would lead to a similar result.

Ultimately, Anshel Pfeffer has made little attempt to grasp the concerns that fundamentally altered Israel’s political landscape, starting in the 1970s. We only hear Labor Zionism’s side of the story. Netanyahu is currently serving his third consecutive term, and fourth overall. He was the youngest prime minister in Israel’s history, the first born after independence, and—if he remains in office until July 17, 2019—the longest serving. By failing to consider why, the author has done a disservice to history and to the Israeli people. As much as elites hail democracy, they sure don’t seem to love the actual people who participate in it. Pfeffer chastises Netanyahu for a gloomy vision of the world, a “lack of faith in the Jews.” Yet the Jews elected Bibi four times. So who really lacks faith?

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