

Jews and Power

by Ruth R Wisse, Nextbook/Schocken, 2007, 231 pp.

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For those who find John Walt and Stephen Mearsheimer's *The Israel Lobby and US Foreign Policy* persuasive, Ruth Wisse's *Jews and Power* is the perfect antidote. In contrast to Walt and Mearsheimer's account of a shadowy Jewish cabal manipulating US foreign policy, Wisse's book is a study of Jewish powerlessness.

Some maintained that Jewish power ended, and Jewish politics were suspended, with the loss of sovereignty 2,000 years ago when the Romans conquered Judea. Others thought it a liberation: once freed from the burdens of state, the Jews could develop the ideals of messianic redemption.

Ruth Wisse argues convincingly that the Jews did practise politics in exile – but as a strategy of accommodation. The Biblical book of Esther, whose story Jews read every year at the festival of Purim, amounts to what Wisse calls 'a primer for Jewish foreign policy.' The beautiful Jewess Esther, married to the King of Persia, together with her uncle Mordecai saves the Jews from annihilation at the hands of the evil Haman. The lessons are clear: be steadfastly loyal to your ruler in return for his protection, and use what limited political leverage you have to better your chances of survival.

In the diaspora the Jews followed the principle of *dina de malchuta dina* –Aramaic for 'the law of the land is the (Jewish) law.' The Jews made themselves indispensable as merchants, bankers, money-lenders, minters, craftsmen, and midwives. Their intellectual energy arose from political weakness. Their absolute dependency on the ruler rendered them all the more trustworthy. The *stadlan*, or court Jew, could easily cross the line to *moser*, or informer. So much for the antisemitic charge of 'dual loyalty': if conflicted between loyalty to the king or to their co-religionists, they would sooner betray the latter.

It is a pity that Wisse does not give more than a passing mention to *dhimmitude*, the institutionalised inferior status of non-Muslims under Islam, denoting also a mentality of subservience, obsequiousness, denial, and even identification with one's tormentors.

Every so often the ruler could not or would not protect the Jews and, like Armenian and Chinese minorities, they were vulnerable to what Wisse calls 'middlemen' riots. What made their defencelessness bearable was the Jews' sense of their own 5,000-year-old invincibility, bolstered by faith in God, the supreme ruler.

Western European emancipation gave the Jews citizens' rights and greater physical security. It also brought influence: Sir Moses Montefiore and Adolphe Cremieux were able to intervene on behalf of their Eastern co-religionists who had been accused of murdering a monk and his servant for ritual purposes in the 1840 Damascus affair. However, as Wisse shrewdly points out, emancipation also laid the Jews wide open to demagogic anti-Semitism. The replacement of the ruler by an elected assembly actually reduced the power of the Jews. Jewish powerlessness reached its tragic nadir when the Allies showed they were not prepared to bomb the Nazi death camps to save Jewish lives.

History is written by the victors, so Jewish turncoats like Flavius Josephus put a Roman spin on his account of the Jewish wars. It was an ex-Jewish convert, Pablo Christiani, who debated the rabbi Nahmanides in a medieval disputation, even though he knew it could put his former brethren in danger. In the West today, some Jewish intellectuals, especially on the far left – eager to dissociate themselves from the state of Israel, which they view as an anachronism or an extension of European colonialism – give credibility to anti-Zionism.

At first Jews did not take easily to the idea of using force – a key component of power. As the 19th century Zionist movement to restore a national homeland gathered pace, Ruth Wisse contends that 'noticeably absent from Jewish planning was the military force that every nation assumes it needs to retain, or regain its land.' In his book *Altneuland*, Theodor Herzl, the so-called father of Zionism, 'replicates the adaptive policies of the Diaspora.' Of all the prerequisites of a modern state – land, central political authority and means of self-defence – Herzl focused only on land.

A character in a play by Israel Zangwill ends up shooting himself when his attempts to unite Jews in self-defensive action end in discord and factionalism. It seemed almost that the Jew was congenitally 'too sophisticated for so primitive and savage a function.' Nevertheless, half a million Jews donned the uniforms of the European powers to fight in the Great War, often against each other. The regiments of Palestinian Jews who fought for Britain reaped no political dividend.

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The restoration of Jewish sovereignty after 2000 years should have normalised Israel's status in the family of nations. Instead, the Jewish strategy of accommodation collided head-on with 'the Arab political tradition of conquest and expansion.' Thus the Jews swallowed their reservations and accepted the 1947 UN Partition Plan, while the Arab League unleashed five armies on the fledgling Jewish state as soon as Israel was declared.

Once-powerless Jews are now accused of being too strong. The Palestinians present themselves as surrogate Jews, defining themselves in opposition to them, appropriating Jewish symbols, history and identity. Every milestone in the Palestinian calendar is a defeat or disaster inflicted on them by the Jews. Wisse wryly observes that 'they are so focused on what belongs to the Jews that they cannot focus on what is theirs to enjoy.'

But the lopsided Arab war against Israel, the author reminds us, pits five million Jews against 270 million Arabs – with infinitely more land and resources – abetted by one billion Muslims. Clearly, Jewish sovereignty is not the same as power. Arab and Muslim political clout at the UN has made up for repeated military defeats at the hands of the tiny Jewish state. As Abba Eban once put it – 'Israel is the only country to win a war and sue for peace.' The creation of Israel has reproduced in the Middle East a 'political imbalance almost identical to the one Jews had in the diaspora.'

While dictatorships parade their military might, Israel makes foreign dignitaries tour the Holocaust memorial, Yad Vashem – as if to say, 'all we want is to be spared this fate.' In the 1990s wishful thinking led to Israel signing what Wisse views as the 'suicidal' Oslo accords. As Wisse puts it, 'No other people had armed its enemy with the expectation of gaining security.'

The Jews are self-consciously preoccupied with their moral performance – what Wisse describes as 'moral solipsism.' Golda Meir greeted president Sadat of Egypt on his historic peace-seeking mission to Jerusalem with, 'We can forgive you for killing our sons, but we will never forgive you for making us kill yours.' But Sadat came not out of regret that he had killed too many Israelis but because he had not killed enough to defeat them.

The French intellectual Jean-François Revel once observed that democracy contained the seeds of its own destruction when faced with an enemy without

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moral scruples and self-criticism. In Israel, obsessive self-examination stops short of draft-dodging, but to its enemies is an admission of weakness.

Ultimately, no amount of Jewish self-flagellation and self-blame for Israel's permanent state of war with the Arabs will make a difference. Just as anti-Semitism is the anti-Semite's problem, so the 100-years war of the Arabs against the Jews reflects the *overriding* need for a political target in the absence of unity and democracy.

Wisse concludes on the comforting note that Israel, the Jew among nations, has been forced to innovate and develop a military and scientific edge valuable to its allies – just as the particular skills of stateless Jews once made them indispensable to their host societies.

Besides, Israel is in the front line in the fight against terror. But here Wisse's American optimism is out of synch with the prevailing European view. European elites are far from ready to acknowledge Israel's role on the front line in the war on Islamist terror, and rather too many consider Israel as the main cause of it.

Nevertheless, *Jews and Power* is compelling. 'I have been writing this book all my life,' Ruth Wisse declares, and it shows. Almost every sentence in this short, readable, clear and concise work is studded with nuggets of insight and neat paradoxes, interspersed with the vignettes one expects from a professor of literature. Walt and Mearsheimer, take note.

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