

Shut Up, I'm Talking and Other Diplomacy Lessons I Learned in the Israeli Government

by Gregory Levey, Free Press, 2008, 288 pp.

Inna Tysoe

The argument John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt present in *The Israel Lobby* boils down to this: there exists in the United States an extraordinarily powerful Israel Lobby which regularly ‘checks in’ with Israeli officials about what Israel’s interests are. Once the Israeli officials debrief members of the Lobby, the Lobby ensures that Americans – from the media to the White House – believe that US national interests are identical to Israel’s. Or, as Mearsheimer and Walt put it ‘American Jewish leaders often consult Israeli officials to make sure that their actions advance Israeli goals.’ [1]

This theory presupposes – amongst other things – that Israeli officials can be reached for consultation (or for any other purpose); that Israeli officials know what Israel’s interests are; that Israeli officials are capable of communicating Israel’s interests; and that Israeli officials are capable of acting on Israel’s national interests without help. To read Gregory Levey’s *Shut Up, I'm Talking and Other Diplomacy Lessons I Learned in the Israeli Government* is to know that these are truly heroic assumptions.

Levey was the twenty-five year old public relations person at Israel’s Mission to the United Nations and, later, a speech writer for then-Prime Minister Ariel Sharon. He was, in short, one of those ‘Israeli officials’ whom the Lobby would have contacted to find out what Israel’s interests were at any given moment. So it’s worth reading his memoir for the inside dope on ‘the lobby.’

Before the Lobby can communicate with the Israeli Government, it has to get hold of it. Levey’s memoir describes how he tried to contact Israeli officials as a bored law student who had decided to offer the Israeli Mission to the United Nations some free and well-qualified labor. In other words, he tried to apply for an internship. What happened next is best relayed in Greg’s own words:

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I went to the Mission's website, and emailed the general address listed there. After a week I had received no response, so I called the number on the site. Reaching the secretary's answering machine, I politely listed my name and number and stated that I was interested in an internship. Again I waited a week and got no response. But if law school had taught me anything, it was that no ocean is crossed without a sea of paperwork, so I faxed a letter to the number listed on the site, waited another week, and got no response. This went on for a few months... (p. 11)

Getting in touch with an Israeli official, it turns out, was no easy task – even for a man who ended up becoming one. Actually, since Walt and Mearsheimer found activists who are able to get in touch with Israeli officials quite easily, they should do us a favor and write a step-by-step guide explaining the mechanics of how this is done. It would be a best-seller.

Once you have gotten in touch with Israeli officials, what do they tell you about Israel's interests? It turns out they quote Seinfeld episodes. In the frenzied yet stifflingly bureaucratized atmosphere that was the Prime Minister's Office, Levey (the Prime Minister's speech writer) kept himself sane by '[inserting] covert references to Seinfeld episodes into the speeches of the prime minister of Israel.' Levey was particularly inspired by Seinfeld writer Dan O'Keefe invention of an annual holiday, 'Festivus,' marked by rituals such as the 'The Airing of Grievances,' in which each person tells everyone else all the ways they have disappointed him or her over the past year, as well as 'The Feats of Strength' ritual which involves wrestling the host to the floor.

The Seinfeld characters said about Festivus 'It's your heritage. It's part of who you are' which seemed like an easy phrase to insert into Sharon's speech to a group of young Diaspora Jews [Sharon] was encouraging to immigrate to Israel.'

Seinfeld and company also talk about the Festivus 'feats of strength' ritual. This was a bit trickier, but since it would be coming from the strongman, Sharon, it seemed doable. So, in a speech touching on the prospects for peace, I wrote, 'There is a time for feats of strength, and a time for feats of reconciliation.'

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A third reference, and the hardest to incorporate, was the other ritual of Festivus, the 'airing of grievances.' It was a stretch, but in a speech about the future of Israel, I wrote that the Israelis had 'to choose between the pessimism of airing of grievances' and the optimism of moving forward.' (pp. 204-5)

Walt and Measheimer's statement that 'The Lobby's perspective prevails in the mainstream media' [2] now begins to make sense. Seinfeld is an integral part of American – and perhaps world – culture. So when you're tired of leaving messages with Israeli officials that don't get answered, you can get the 'message of the day' by turning on Seinfeld. (Well, you will get the messages from 1989 to 1998 but since that's more than you will get from Israeli officials, you really shouldn't complain.)

Actually, there is good reason to prefer Seinfeld to the typical Israeli official. Seinfeld, you might be able to understand. A huge advantage when you consider the case of former Foreign Minister, Silvan Shalom, whose job it was to communicate Israel's interests to the world, including (I presume) the Lobby. Silvan Shalom had a legion of speech writers to help him do just that, and since one of these writers was (on this occasion) Greg Levey, we have some idea of how well Israel's interests were articulated by Israel's Foreign Minister during a speech to the United Nations.

It was very close to Yom Kippur, the Jewish day of atonement, and ... we had mentioned it in his speech. Now it was very unclear why, because he kept fatally tripping upon it on each run through. ... Eventually we decided to set the rest of the speech aside and just concentrate on his performance on this one word.

At-won-ment

Ate-ony-ment

A-toon-ment. (p. 133)

Walt and Mearsheimer's claim the United States represents Israel, quoting an American official as saying: 'Far too often, we functioned... as Israel's lawyer.' [3] I am not particularly religious person but given the Foreign Minister's performance all I can say is Thank God. Someone had to do it and the Foreign Minister was clearly not up to the job. (Neither, if truth be told, is Seinfeld.)

And what happens when it's more than a matter of pronouncing atonement (and all the other words in a speech); what happens when there are genuine national

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interests at stake? And not just Israel’s interests; American and European ones as well? How do the Israelis behave then? Levey describes such a situation.

He had just started working for the Israeli Mission. And, as part of his orientation, his supervisor sent him to the UN to take notes. No-one at the Mission expected anything to happen that day – it just seemed a good day to get Levey acclimatized to the United Nations building and to his new job. He walks in, sits down and a senior Italian ambassador leans over to him and says ‘So you know, the vote is definitely going to happen today after all...’ The Italian ambassador tells Levey the number of the UN Resolution to be voted on but not what the Resolution is about.

Levey tries to reach the Mission. But, of course, no-one is picking up. Finally he gets through to a private line but his cell phone reception dies. Desperate now, he tries to ask the Italian ambassador how Italy will be voting. All he gets in return is the assurance that the European ambassadors had ‘worked it out.’ Running out of options, he crosses the floor of the United Nations to ask the American ambassador for instructions on how to vote.

‘Um, yeah...’ I said, drawing it awkwardly and almost stuttering. ‘I’m uh... representing Israel at this meeting.’ ...

‘Anyway,’ I went on, leaning in a bit so that nobody else would hear me, ‘I don’t really ... exactly ... know how I’m supposed to vote, and – ‘
‘You don’t know?’ he asked incredulously.
‘Not as such,’ I said slowly... ‘There has been some miscommunication at the Israeli Mission today.’

He’d clearly had experience dealing with the Israeli Mission, because this part didn’t seem to surprise him at all; he just nodded.

‘Anyway,’ I continued painfully, ‘I just wanted to know if you would mind telling me how you guys were going to vote.’

He paused for a moment, looking around warily to make sure that nobody was around. Then he leaned in even closer to me. His assistants did the same, until the four of us were essentially in a huddle on the floor of the assembly hall.

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‘This is just between you and us,’ he warned me and when I nodded, he whispered, ‘We’re voting no.’ (pp. 110-11)

So Greg – still not knowing anything about the UN Resolution except its number – followed the US lead and voted no. Or rather Israel voted no, for Greg Levey was representing Israel that day. As Walt and Mearsheimer might say, the US provided a ‘remarkable level of diplomatic support’ [4] to Israel.

If Barbara Tuchman is right that ‘biography [is] a prism of history’ [5] then this memoir should make us think twice about the notion that there is an all-powerful Lobby in regular contact with Israeli officials dictating US policy. When Israeli officials cannot be reached, nor articulate the word atonement (much less Israel’s interests), and when on questions of national interest they turn to the US for advice, not the other way around, then maybe Greg Levey’s *Shut Up, I’m Talking* is the better guide to ‘the Israel Lobby’ and Walt and Mearsheimer’s the funnier book.

Inna Tysoe once dreamed of making it in journalism. Her Harvard admission essay claimed that she would, one day, be the Editor of the *New York Times*. Harvard didn’t let her in and she never became the *New York Times* editor. But her troubles didn’t end there. After completing her education at UC Berkeley (History and Political Science) she missed out on her chance to be an English Lady. (Her husband’s great-great Grand-dad married a barmaid who was ‘very pretty and could cook exceptionally well’ and was promptly kicked out of the nobility for his waywardness.) She also went to work as a civil servant which means she knows how to pretend she knows what she’s talking about. She’s married to (non-Lord) Adrian Tysoe. They have two pugs: Sir Winston Churchill the Cuter and Braveheart.

References

- Levey, Gregory (2008), *Shut Up, I’m Talking and Other Diplomacy Lessons I Learned in the Israeli Government*, New York: Free Press.
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- Tuchman, Barbara (1981) ‘Biography as a Prism of History’, in her *Practicing History: Selected Essays*, New York: Ballantine Books.

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Notes

- [1] Mearsheimer and Walt 2006.
- [2] Mearsheimer and Walt 2006.
- [3] Mearsheimer and Walt 2006.
- [4] Mearsheimer and Walt 2006.
- [5] Tuchman 1981, p. 80.