My Promised Land
The Triumph and Tragedy of Israel
Ari Shavit
Spiegel & Grau (2013)

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Flyleaf
An authoritative and deeply personal narrative history of the State of Israel, by one of the most influential journalists writing about the Middle East today

Not since Thomas L. Friedman’s groundbreaking From Beirut to Jerusalem has a book captured the essence and the beating heart of the Middle East as keenly and dynamically as My Promised Land. Facing unprecedented internal and external pressures, Israel today is at a moment of existential crisis. Ari Shavit draws on interviews, historical documents, private diaries, and letters, as well as his own family’s story, illuminating the pivotal moments of the Zionist century to tell a riveting narrative that is larger than the sum of its parts: both personal and national, both deeply human and of profound historical dimension.

We meet Shavit’s great-grandfather, a British Zionist who in 1897 visited the Holy Land on a Thomas Cook tour and understood that it was the way of the future for his people: the idealist young farmer who bought land from his Arab neighbor in the 1920s to grow the Jaffa oranges that would create Palestine’s booming economy; the visionary youth group leader who, in the 1940s, transformed Masada from the neglected ruins of an extremist sect into a powerful symbol for Zionism; the Palestinian who as a young man in 1948 was driven with his family from his home during the expulsion from Lydda; the immigrant orphans of Europe’s Holocaust, who took on menial work and focused on raising their children to become the leaders of the new state; the pragmatic engineer who was instrumental in developing Israel’s nuclear program in the 1950s, in the only interview he ever gave; the zealous religious Zionists who started the settler movement in the 1970s; the dot-com entrepreneurs and young men and women behind Tel Aviv’s booming club scene; and today’s architects of Israel’s foreign policy with Iran, whose nuclear threat looms ominously over the tiny country.

As it examines the complexities and contradictions of the Israeli condition, My Promised Land asks difficult but important questions: Why did Israel come to be? How did it come to be? Can Israel survive? Culminating with an analysis of the issues and threats that Israel is currently facing, My Promised Land uses the defining events of the past to shed new light on the present. The result is a landmark portrait of a small, vibrant country living* on the edge, whose identity and presence play a crucial role in today’s global political landscape.

ARI SHAVIT is a leading Israeli journalist, a columnist for Haaretz, and a commentator on Israeli public television.
WINNER OF THE NATAN BOOK AWARD
Back cover

Praise for MY PROMISED LAND

"This is the epic history that Israel deserves—beautifully written, dramatically rendered, full of moral complexity. Ari Shavit has made a storied career of explaining Israel to Israelis; now he shares his mind-blowing, trustworthy insights with the rest of us. It is the best book on the subject to arrive in many years."

FRANKLIN FOER, editor, The New Republic

"A beautiful, mesmerizing, morally serious, and vexing book. I've been waiting most of my adult life for an Israeli to plumb the deepest mysteries of his country's existence and share his discoveries, and Ari Shavit does so brilliantly, writing simultaneously like a poet and a prophet. My Promised Land is a remarkable achievement."

JEFFREY GOLDBERG, national correspondent, The Atlantic

"Ari Shavit's My Promised Land is without question one of the most important books about Israel and Zionism that I have ever read. Both movingly inspiring and at times heartbreakingly painful, My Promised Land tells the story of the Jewish state as it has never been told before, capturing both the triumph and the torment of Israel's experience and soul. This is the book that has the capacity to reinvent and reshape the long-overdue conversation about how Israel's complex past ought to shape its still-uncertain future."

DANIEL GORDIS, author of Saving Israel and Koret Distinguished Fellow at Shalem College, Jerusalem

"With the heart of a storyteller and the mind of a historian, Ari Shavit has written a powerful and compelling book about the making of modern Israel. No country is more emotionally connected to the United States, and no country's fate matters more to many Americans. And yet until Shavit's My Promised Land, it has been growing more difficult to sense the character of Israel through all the caricatures. This book is vital reading for Americans who care about the future, not only of the United States but of the world."

JON MEACHAM, author of Thomas Jefferson: The Art of Power

"My Promised Land is a passionate yet fair-minded account of how the Israel of today came into being. Whether or not you agree with its premises and assumptions, you will find this book hard to put down for its sheer narrative force. Both lyrically personal and rigorously reported, Ari Shavit's book will undoubtedly shape for years to come the conversation about a country we all talk about but few of us know well."

DAPHNE MERKIN, author of Dreaming of Hitler and Enchantment

SOURCE NOTES

My Promised Land is not an academic work of history. Rather, it is a personal journey through contemporary and historic Israel, recounting the larger Israel saga by telling several dozen specific Israeli stories that are significant and poignant.

The chapter "At First Sight" is based on Bentwich family documents, Herbert Bentwich's own writings, some notes left by his fellow travelers, and articles describing the 1897 Maccabean pilgrimage published in the Jewish-English press and the Jewish-Hebrew press of the day.

"Into the Valley" incorporates interviews with some of Yitzhak Tabenkin's disciples and an enormous body of records and memoirs kept in the Ein Harod archives.

"Orange Grove" was inspired by numerous conversations with Rehovot's elderly orange growers, who were still alive in the late 2000s, and by the local records stored in the Rehovot archives.

The trek and seminar in "Masada" are based on interviews I conducted with Shmaryahu Gutman in 1992 and on pieces published in the spring of 1942 in Labor Movement newspapers and periodicals.

"Lydda" assembles numerous accounts of the traumatic events recounted to me in the early 1990s by Mula Cohen, Shmaryahu Gutman, Yisrael Goralnik, Gabriel Cohen, Yael Degani, Ottman Abu Hammud, and some of the other protagonists of the 1948 tragedy.

"Housing Estate" tells the life stories of Holocaust (and farhud) survivors I interviewed among them Ze'ev Sternhell, Aharon Appelfeld, Aharon Barak, Louise Aynachi, Anna Spiegel, Arie Beldegrum, Yehulit Fisher, Shlomo Teicher, and some of the other residents of the Bitzaron estate.

At the core of "The Project" is a unique encounter I had in 2009 with Yosef Tulipman, who was the director general of the Dimona nuclear reactor in the critical years 1965-1973.

"Settlement" is a reconstruction of the founding of the pivotal settlement of Ofra, based on interviews with Yoel Bin Nun, Pinchas Wallerstein, Yehudin Etzion, Israel Harel, and other Ofra founders in 2009-2011.

"Gaza Beach" was first published in Haaretz and in The New York Review of Books in 1991, shortly after I completed military reserve duty in the notorious detention camp.

"Peace" contains interviews with Yossi Sarid, Yossi Beilin, Avishai Margalit, Menachem Brinker, and Amos Oz (conducted in 2008-2011), and an older interview with Jamal Munheir (conducted in 1993).

"J'Accuse" is first and foremost the life story of Aryeh Deri as told to me at great length by him and his mother and as described in his biography and in Israeli magazine pieces written about him over two decades.

"Sex, Drugs, and the Israeli Condition" is an updated version of a comprehensive Tel-Aviv night-life piece that I published in Haaretz as the previous millennium was drawing to a close.

"Up the Galilee," too, was first published in Haaretz, in January 2003.

"Reality Shock" embodies some of the insights I had in real time during (he Second Lebanon War of 2006.

"Occupy Rothschild" is based on in-depth interviews with Michael Strauss, Kobi Richter, and Itzik Shmuli (2007-2011) and on conversations with Stanley Fischer and Dan Ben David (2011).
"Existential Challenge" gives Amos Yadlin's interpretation of the Iranian saga as he described it to me in 2012-2013, along with my own insights.

"By the Sea" contains a small portion of the observations I had while touring my homeland as my years-long journey was coming to an end.

Pursuing my tour of Israel, old and new, I read hundreds of books and thousands of documents that have inspired me and enriched my experience. To make sure all details are correct, oral histories were checked and double checked against Israel's written history. The exciting process of interviewing significant individuals was interwoven with a meticulous process of data gathering and fact checking. And yet, at the end of the day, My Promised Land is all about people. The book I have written is the story of Israel as it is seen by individual Israelis, of whom I am one.