

# Two Providential Nations

On Walter Russell Mead's *The Arc of a Covenant*

By Meir Y. Soloveichik

**L**ET US ponder the Blackstone Memorial, one of the most fascinating occasions in the history of the American relationship with Zionism and one almost entirely forgotten today. It was drawn up in 1891 by William Blackstone, a prominent evangelical minister, and personally presented in the White House to President Benjamin Harrison. The petition proclaimed, several years before the epiphany of Theodor Herzl, that the world powers should seek to alleviate the suffering of Jews by restoring them to the Holy Land: "Why shall not the powers which under the

treaty of Berlin, in 1878, gave Bulgaria to the Bulgarians and Servia to the Servians now give Palestine back to the Jews? These provinces, as well as Roumania, Montenegro and Greece, were wrested from the Turks and given to their natural owners. Does not Palestine as rightly belong to the Jews?"

The memorial's signatories were not merely men of the cloth; among the 400 who appended their appellations to the document included the speaker of the House of the Representatives and the Supreme Court of the United States. And yet, while prominent Gentile politicians, jurists, and businessman readily signed, Blackstone attempted in vain to convince one of America's most prominent Reform rabbis to join him. Emil G. Hirsch summarily informed Blackstone that he no longer embraced the biblical promise of Israel's return to the Holy Land: "We, the modern Jews, say that we do not wish to be restored to Palestine."

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The tale of the Blackstone Memorial is one of many fascinating stories in Walter Russell Mead's sweeping new work, *The Arc of a Covenant: The United States, Israel, and the Fate of the Jewish People*.<sup>\*</sup> For Mead, it highlights how, long before modern Israel came into existence, the fate of the Holy Land and the Jewish people was a subject of enormous interest, fascination, and speculation for Americans, and how this is still reflected in the American-Israel relationship today:

Israel occupies a unique place in American foreign policy because it occupies a unique, and uniquely charged, place in the American mind.... America's long immersion in biblical Christianity and in a theory of progress that both secular and religious Americans have built on those foundations has given the Jewish people and the Jewish state a distinctive place in American historical consciousness and political thought. The state of Israel is a speck on the map of the world; it occupies a continent in the American mind.

As Mead explains in his introduction, his motivation in writing this volume was to offer a response to critics of Israel and American foreign policy who wrongly attribute the special U.S.-Israel relationship throughout the years to American-Jewish political and financial power. These critics fail to understand, Mead argues, that it is America's Gentiles, with *their* unique history, who have been central to America's focus on the Middle East in general and on the Holy Land in particular. Mead compares these critics to French astronomers who once posited the existence of a nonexistent planet and interpreted all other cosmic phenomena founded on this faulty premise. He seeks to show these critics what they have been missing, because "the mistaken impression that Zionism is an agenda that powerful Jews imposed either on the United States or on the gentile world at large remains a major reason why so much of our national conversation about Middle East policy consumes so much energy but produces so little good policy."

This is exactly correct, and it is therefore an immensely important task that Mead has undertaken. Mead, however, argues that Zionists also fail to recognize the impact of Gentiles on Zionism:

Both the pro-Zionist and anti-Zionist narratives about the birth of the Jewish state exaggerate the Jewish role in the events that created Israel and overlook the critical importance of Gentile support in making the Zionist movement powerful among Jews. As I studied the degree to which the Zionist movement's unique ability to get critical Gentile support gave Zionism a prominence and power among Jews that it otherwise could never have had, I was frequently tempted to subtitle this book "Don't Blame Israel on the Jews."

But is this true? Does any established proponent of the "pro-Zionist" narrative really overlook the importance of non-Jewish support to the birth of Israel? Historians of Zionism have long noted how central the fascination Herzl himself exerted upon European heads of state was to the Zionist leader's success; how non-Jewish Englishmen in the Victorian era devoured proto-Zionist novels such as *Tancred* and *Daniel Deronda*; how critical the Evangelical leanings of British prime minister Lloyd George were to the issuing of the Balfour Declaration affirming a Jewish right to a homeland in Palestine in 1917; and how important the support of diverse countries was to the passage of partition at the United Nations.

The fascination of early Americans with the Jews, and the Holy Land, has been remarked upon by Benjamin Netanyahu in his *A Place Among the Nations* and Michael Oren's *Power, Faith, and Fantasy*. When then-Vice President Mike Pence visited Israel's Knesset, both Israel's prime minister at the time and the

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leader of its opposition took pains to make mention of John Adams's expressed hope: "I really wish the Jews in Judea an independent nation."

In his book, Mead does offer one example where he believes that the Zionist account lacks perspective: the purported role played by Jewish activists, especially Eddie Jacobson and Chaim Weizmann, in convincing President Harry Truman to recognize Israel at its first moment of independence. But even the version that Mead criticizes celebrates the Gentile Truman as a Bible-loving "Cyrus" who helped bring

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<sup>\*</sup> Knopf, 672 pages

Israel into being.

Zionist historians have also long documented how Zionism was not embraced by all Jews; that originally anti-Zionism was a core tenet of Reform Judaism; and that Prime Minister Menachem Begin, disregarding the more secular predilections of many American Jews, recognized how critical Christian support would be for Israel and took pains to cultivate that

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support and to return that evangelical embrace.

So I do not think it has been the Zionists who have overlooked the importance of Gentile support throughout Zionism's history.

That said, informing the world about why America has long been fascinated with Israel is a profoundly important task, and Mead assiduously and invaluable documents the theological and political threads of this several-century story from before the American Founding until today. To this he adds an elaborate account of what he has long called the "Jacksonian" strain in American society, which admires Israel's toughness and military strength. And perhaps most notable, and most fascinating, he incisively analyzes the nature of evangelical support for Israel, stressing that those "who say that American policy is pro-Israel because evangelicals are strong have missed at least half the story."

For Mead, it is not merely that Americans of faith support Israel, but that Israel's story supports faith. "The return of the Jews to the Holy Land and the establishment against all odds of a powerful Jewish state in the deserts of Palestine" strikes many religious Americans, Mead argues, as proof of some of the following central tenets of Bible faith: that "God exists; he drives history; he performs miracles in real time; [and that] God's word in the Bible is true." A reading of some of the most intriguing aspects of *The Arc of a Covenant* should inspire us to ask whether perhaps the amazing details of Zionism's story do indeed prove exactly that.

## II.

One of the most compelling sections of Mead's book is its analysis of the actions taken by the various members of the Truman administration during the tumultuous

days of 1948. Following the passage, in the prior year, of UN resolution 181 supporting the partition of Palestine and the birth of a Jewish State, George Marshall's State Department had imposed an arms embargo on the conflict. This, as Mead notes, handed an enormous advantage to Israel's enemies, who already had weaponry. Marshall, Mead argues, was no anti-Semite. Rather, he was convinced that the Jews in the

Middle East could not possibly survive a united Arab assault, and it therefore "seemed incomprehensible to him that the United States should alienate Arab opinion, further stress its relationship with Great Britain, and distract itself and the world from the looming confrontation

with the Soviets in Berlin."

Mead writes that, for Marshall, supporters of Jewish independence "were willing to encourage the Jews into a war that they could not win." The State Department therefore supported a reversal of partition. And while Mead notes that Truman's response to Marshall's proposal was unclear, it seems that the president had given the State Department "a limited, hedged permission to introduce a trusteeship plan," but only if "the U.N. itself had in some way acknowledged the failure of its partition plan."

In the face of Marshall's opposition, Truman's Jewish friend and former haberdashery partner Ed die Jacobson pleaded with the president to meet with Chaim Weizmann, the world-famous scientist and global evangelist for Zionism. The president agreed, and the two met on March 19. The next day, to Truman's shock, Warren Austin, the chief of the American Delegation at the United Nations, announced American support for a trusteeship.

In many Zionist accounts of the tale of Truman and Israel, the visit by Jacobson, and the private audience with Weizmann that took place immediately after, is seen as critical to sustaining Truman's ultimate support for partition, and for a Jewish state. Mead questions this, given that Truman never officially recanted what his own UN representative had announced, and had allowed his delegation to continue to pursue the policy at the United Nations:

No official record of the meeting exists, and neither Weizmann nor Truman ever gave a full account of what was said....Many writers, both pro- and anti-Zionist, have seen the March meeting between the two leaders as equally consequential. That seems unlikely. As we've

noted, Truman's policy did not change after meeting with Weizmann. Following Austin's U.N. speech, the United States continued to oppose partition and support alternatives right up until May 14.

Yet while it is true that the meeting with Weizmann was never officially documented, the various accounts of what occurred both during the meeting and after have been attentively collated by Allis and Ronald Radosh in their book *A Safe Haven: Harry S. Truman and the Founding of Israel*. The Radoshes tell us that Weizmann's wife, Vera, recorded in her diary immediately after the meeting that Truman had told her husband that he still "supported partition." Truman's assistant Clark Clifford, in turn, reported that following Austin's announcement, Truman was "as disturbed as I have ever seen him," adding, "I assured Chaim Weizmann that we were for partition and would stick to it. He must think I'm a plain liar." It is further clear from Truman's diary in the moment that he had guaranteed something to Weizmann:

This morning I find that the State Dept. has reversed my Palestine policy. The first I know about it is what I see in the papers! I am now in the position of a liar and a double-crosser.... There are people on the third and fourth levels of the State Dept. who have always wanted to cut my throat. They've succeeded in doing it.

The Radoshes further recount that in an April 12 meeting with Jacobson, the president, according to Jacobson's recollection, "reaffirmed, very strongly, the promises he had made to Dr. Weizmann and me; and he gave me permission to tell Dr. Weizmann so." Presidential speechwriter Sam Rosenmann, we are told, was then sent to the Zionist leader to tell him that in a meeting with the president, Truman's first words were "I have Dr. Weizmann on my conscience."

All this indicates that as Austin and Marshall sought to undo partition and were finding no takers for their proposal of a trusteeship, the president of the United States was operating independently against them—or, as the Radoshes put it, just as "the State Department's proposals were floundering at the United Nations, the president was going in another direction."

I am therefore more sympathetic than Mead is to the traditional account: that while Truman could

not openly reverse his own State Department without looking weak and ineffectual, Weizmann played an important role, if not the only one, in sustaining Truman's support for partition.

But to argue the importance of Weizmann is not to suggest that his own lobbying was sufficient, and Mead rightly cautions us not to focus on the Truman-Weizmann connection as the only important detail in the story of 1948. He highlights another stunning reason why Truman could not embrace Marshall's policy recommendations in this matter, despite his reverence for his secretary of state. It was, he writes, "a presidential election year and Truman's chances for winning the Democratic nomination, much less the November election, hung by a thread." In his quest to unite his party behind him, "it was the liberal internationalists that Truman was primarily worried about," and he needed their support to win the Democratic nomination.

"Eleanor Roosevelt and her allies believed that the United Nations was humanity's only hope to avoid World War III, that Resolution 181 calling for the partition of Palestine was its most important decision to date, and that it was now the job of President Truman to ensure that the U.N. Resolution was obeyed," Mead writes. Marshall failed to understand that "Truman needed authority and power to chart America's course in the Cold War. He could not retain that authority without the support of his own party."

Meanwhile, as Mead further documents, an entirely new reason appeared for Truman to counterbalance Marshall's fears of a Jewish defeat in the Middle East. In late March, a mysterious representative of Czechoslovakia entered the Paris hotel room of David Ben-Gurion's representative Ehud Avriel and offered to sell arms and planes to the Jews of the Middle East.

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This was, of course, not an independent decision by the Czechs. As Mead puts it, following "decades of hostility between Communists and Zionists, Stalin tilted and tilted hard toward the Zionists just long enough for Israel to win its war of independence."

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dence, that Truman, over the vociferous objections of Marshall, decided to recognize the nascent state once they did so. Mead concedes that the meeting with Weizmann did also affect Truman's ultimate decision on recognition, but emphasizes that in the end we cannot lose sight of party politics:

Keeping the Democratic Party united as he led the country into a Cold War with the Soviet Union was the big goal Truman never lost sight of. Aligning his Palestine policy as far as possible with the liberals who wanted the issue resolved by the United Nations was one of the ways in which he achieved it.

Mead thus reveals a fantastic facet of the story of Israel, one with immense irony: that the liberal obsession with vindicating the United Nations helped bring the State of Israel into being. The organization most identified today with Israel-hatred was the very vehicle that had assured its inception.

### III.

We return then, to the conclusion that, Mead tells us, many religious Americans draw from the story of Israel: "God exists; he drives history; he performs miracles in real time." How else is one to understand this? To visit Israel is to see biblical promises made thousands of years ago suddenly fulfilled; Ezekiel's vision of God opening the graves of Israel and bringing them to the promised land, Isaiah's promise that a wilderness will be made into an Eden, Zachariah's assurance that Jewish grandparents and grandchildren will one day sit in a crowded Jerusalem.

But even if we are to overlook every one of these,

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what are we to make of the astonishing series of events that brought Israel into being? Are we to view it as total coincidence that what were for most of its existence the symbols of implacable opposition to the Jewish state—the Soviet Union and the United Nations—were also critical to its birth? This point was made in the pages of COMMENTARY by Paul Johnson, who reflected in May 1998: "In the last half-century, over 100

completely new independent states have come into existence. Israel is the only one whose creation can fairly be called a miracle. The fact that anti-Semites helped bring Israel into existence is itself part of the wonder of the story. Another paradoxical aspect of the Zionist miracle, which we certainly did not grasp at the time and which is insufficiently understood even now, is that among the founding fathers of Israel was Joseph Stalin."

And then there is Truman. We do not know how Roosevelt would ultimately have acted had he still been in the White House in 1948. But if Mead is right about Truman's calculations, we may rest assured that Roosevelt would not have likewise worried about the niceties of the Democratic nomination. And Roosevelt's attitude to the plight of the Jewish people might have been entirely different. Truman's biographer David McCullough tells us:

The two ardent champions of the Jewish cause on the White House staff were Clark Clifford and David K. Niles, Truman's special assistant for minority affairs. Niles, one of the holdovers from the Roosevelt years and himself a Jew, sensed in Truman a fundamental sympathy for the plight of the Jews that he had never felt with Roosevelt. Had Roosevelt lived, Niles later said, things might not have turned out as they did.

Mead's emphasis on the importance of politics to Truman's considerations specifically in 1948 therefore lend even greater depth to Johnson's argument that "Israel slipped into existence through a window that briefly opened, and just as suddenly closed...timing—or, if one likes, providence—was of the essence." Providence, indeed. Israel, in other words, is not only a country beloved today by many of biblical faith; it is, in fact, an argument for, and a foundation of, that faith.

In pondering the future of the American-Israel relationship, one central point can be taken from Mead's fascinating book: that the future of the relationship depends on the future capacity of America to look at the world with a biblical perspective. What George W. Bush said on Israel's 60th anniversary remains true several years after its 70th:

The source of our friendship runs deeper than any treaty. It is grounded in the shared spirit of our people, the bonds of the Book, the ties of



the soul. When William Bradford stepped off the Mayflower in 1620, he quoted the words of Jeremiah: "Come let us declare in Zion the word of God." The founders of my country saw a new promised land and bestowed upon their towns names like Bethlehem and New Canaan. And in time, many Americans became passionate advocates for a Jewish state.

Mead has comprehensively documented the way that faith played a role in the American obsession with the place of the Jews in the Holy Land. But it is hard to finish the book without also believing that this faith has been vindicated. In pondering the further "arc of the covenant," is impossible to predict what will happen next. But it is also impossible not to hope for further miracles yet to come. 🏹