

Review

Ally: My Journey Across the American–Israeli Divide
by Michael Oren
(New York: Random House, 2015), 432 pages

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Very few of Israel's ambassadors in Washington have written insider accounts of the Jewish State's most important bilateral relationship from the vantage point of the most senior overseas posting in Israel's foreign service. Michael Oren, a brilliant historian and author, who served as Israel's ambassador to the United States from 2009–13, set out to do so. Sadly, however, he missed his mark. Of course, it was not the author's objective to write a comprehensive, scholarly work on the Obama–Israel relationship. That book has yet to be written.

Oren had embarked upon his brief diplomatic career with a serious handicap. He was not an insider and had not emerged from the ranks of Israel's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. That fact in itself is not so important because, quite paradoxically, most of Israel's previous ambassadors in Washington were not professional diplomats. Unlike the others, however, Oren, was not one of the Israeli prime minister's close advisers and was not a member of his inner circle. Benjamin Netanyahu probably appointed the New Jersey-born Oren, above all, for his skills in *hasbara*—the effort to explain Israel's cause to the wider world. During the only conversation I ever had with him, shortly before he left for Washington, Oren recounted what the prime minister had advised him to do when he got to America, and that was to spend 70 percent of his time on *hasbara*. What I understood from that revelation was that Oren was to stay away from the meatier issues, the essence of bilateral relations. He was to avoid the ongoing yet painful dialogue between the super-power that is Israel's primary international backer, and Israeli governments, which for decades were unable to find a formula to solve the seemingly unsolvable Israeli–Palestinian conflict. Netanyahu did not have to tell Oren to stay out of the sensitive intelligence exchanges or the hour-to-hour, military-to-military co-operation; most Israeli ambassadors in Washington are only privy to the veneer of those contacts and are busy with other aspects of US–Israeli ties.

Oren, like previous ambassadors, could overcome the handicap of being an outsider only one way— by proving to the prime minister that he was a valuable asset precisely on those issues from which he was indirectly advised to distance himself. You can do this in Washington if the doors to the Oval Office are open to you; however, very few, if any, foreign ambassadors get to see the secretary of state, let alone the president, other than when their own president or prime minister visits Washington. You can penetrate the prime minister's close circle only if you propose useful ideas and courses of actions, and only if you are courageous enough to test them in your daily dialogue with US officials.

Oren does not suggest that he did so. He was most probably left out of the loop of the teams of both countries that dealt with the Israeli–Palestinian issue, and his account of the bitter discussion between the US president and Israel's prime minister does not suggest that he put forth any constructive ideas on how to really minimize the damage to the bilateral relations.

Instead, we are presented with what Oren himself labels an “armchair psychoanalysis” of President Barack Obama, and a pathetic one at that. As a professor of history, and the author of a highly acclaimed book on America's engagement in the Middle East from 1776 until modern times, Oren should have been familiar with the American position on Israel's 1967 lines, which was determined soon after the Six-Day War. The famous 1969 Rogers Plan contains a reference to those lines with the possibility of minor, insubstantial rectifications. No US administration has ever deviated from that policy. Despite the efforts to describe it otherwise, the famous letter written by President Bush to Prime Minister Ariel Sharon in April 2004 quoted below did not constitute a change in this long-held US position. Oren should have stayed in his own discipline—history—rather than dabble in psychoanalysis. As it transpires, he wrote an article on June 16 in the *Wall Street Journal* accusing Obama of having “... altered forty years of US policy by endorsing the 1967 lines with land swaps ...” Reading texts, in this case the Rogers Plan, would have saved Oren from making both the mistake and the wrongful accusation.

In the same article, Oren erred again, claiming that Obama had “... voided President George W. Bush's commitment to include the majorly Jewish Jerusalem within Israel's borders in any peace agreement.” One does not need to be a historian or an insider in the Israeli prime minister's circle, or even a lowly member of Israel's diplomatic corps, to peruse the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' website and to read the text of Bush's letter to Sharon:

As part of a final peace settlement, Israel must have secure and recognized borders, which should emerge from negotiations between the parties in accordance with UNSC Resolution 242 and 338 ... It is unrealistic to expect that the outcome of the final status negotiations will be a full and

complete return to the armistice lines of 1949 It is realistic to expect that any final status agreement will only be achieved on the basis of mutually agreed changes that reflect these realities.

A search for the terms “Jewish” or “Jerusalem” (or any combination of the two) in the aforementioned paragraph, or indeed in the American diplomatic vocabulary (at least that used publicly) would be futile. Did Oren’s obsessive attempt to paint Obama as a president who broke the previous tenets of the US policy toward Israel blind him?

There is no doubt that Obama did make serious mistakes in dealing with Israel and the Palestinian–Israeli conflict, and Democrats, certainly those friendly to Israel, admit that. But Oren, who uses the Yiddish word “*kishke*” [gut] to describe what he thinks the president really felt on this issue, vents his frustration at not being able to say, while ambassador in Washington, what he really thought of Obama. Instead, he does it in the book and in the article quoted above.

To his credit, Oren does deal at length with the central issue of the complex relationship between Israel and the American Jewish community. Having been born and raised in the US, he is especially qualified to write about it. This is also where he demonstrates his “added value,” and he applies his undeniable talents to suggesting solutions to some key, seemingly intractable, problems such as the conversion process in Israel and its impact on US–Israeli relations. Though long, and at times tedious, Oren’s accounts of the *hasbara* battles are interesting, as they portray the tremendous changes in public opinion toward Israel that have taken place in recent years, which are not necessarily fully reflected in the Pew Research Center public opinion surveys. Oren’s innumerable accounts of his engagement with the media and the public, especially students, are especially revealing.

Oren’s book is also troubling for another reason, and I will be careful here not to indulge in the amateur psychoanalysis he so favors. He proves Shimon Peres wrong. Recalling a dinner he hosted for the then-president of Israel, Oren quotes Peres as saying of him (Oren), “This man has no ego.” In fact, Oren’s book can be fairly characterized as one long, off-putting ego trip. Oren takes pains to explain that he was almost Rabin’s right-hand man, and that he was the first Israeli ambassador in Washington to both build a *succab* [booth for the holiday of Sukkoth] next to his residence and host an Iftar holiday dinner for his Arab colleagues in Washington. The heroic Israeli ambassador would hold a mobile phone in one hand while sculling on the Potomac with the other—surely a first.

There is an evocative Yiddish word—*schmaltz* [chicken fat]—to describe excessive sentimentality. Unfortunately, Oren’s book is dripping in it and readers would be well advised to keep a box of wipes handy so they can keep their fingers clean when turning the pages.