

Correcting the Record

"A Respectful Response to Inaccuracies About Israel in President Obama's Autobiography"

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Barack Obama is a highly influential figure revered by millions. His autobiography, *A Promised Land*, has become an instant bestseller. Therefore, it is necessary to address inaccuracies in chapter 25, which deals with Israel. Reform rabbi and founder of the *Jewish Broadcasting Service*, Mark Golub, recently referred to these inaccuracies as “highly troubling.”

I offer this critique with the utmost respect for the former president, an American who has made history. A president, whether in office or not, should be treated with respect. When Judah approached the Egyptian viceroy (who unbeknownst to him was his brother Joseph) to plead his case, he did so respectfully. He was respectful not only because the person he was addressing held an office worthy of respect, but because the respectful tone made it easier for the viceroy to listen (Midrash Bereshit Rabbah).

Therefore, this response is NOT being written from a partisan point of view; supporters of Israel should endeavor to ensure Israel does not become a partisan issue. The aim is simply to correct inaccuracies which should be troubling to all, regardless of where one stands on the political spectrum. In his piece entitled *Obama's revisionist 'Promised Land'*, American born former *Knesset* member Dov Lipman highlights several examples of how “the former U.S. president misleads readers in a way that will forever shape their negative perspective of the Jewish state.” (Lipman, D., Nov. 26, 2020, Jewish News Syndicate, <https://www.jns.org/opinion/obamas-revisionist-promised-land/>). Here I share a few.

Example 1:

“Over the next 20 years [that is 20 years after the Balfour Declaration of 1917] Zionist leaders mobilized a surge of Jewish migration to Palestine.”

As Lipman explains, the lack of historical context makes it sound like Jews simply flooded Palestine in hopes of establishing a state. This plays into the popular intersectional narrative that the Jews are interlopers who stole the land. Though Obama doesn't mention it, it is vital to understand that the League of Nations, the precursor to the United Nations, gave the British legal

rights over Palestine in its 1922 “Mandate for Palestine.” That mandate specifically mentions “the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people,” citing that “recognition has thereby been given to the historical connection of the Jewish people with Palestine and to the grounds for reconstituting their national home in that country.” Simply put, there was a legal basis given for a Jewish home in Palestine. It should not be forgotten that, as Jews fled Europe during the 1920’s due to increased anti-Semitism, many had no place to go other than Palestine due to immigration restrictions, including the American immigration quotas of 1924.

Example 2:

“As Britain withdrew, the two sides quickly fell into war.”

The phrase “fell into war” glosses over the fact that Israel accepted the U.N. partition plan, which called for the establishment of a Jewish state and an Arab state in the territory of Palestine, while Arab armies marched on the nascent Jewish state in an attempt to destroy it. The vague language obfuscates the reality of the situation, creating a false moral equivalence and taking the aggressors off the hook for their unwillingness to compromise and their deadly aggression.

Example 3:

“For the next three decades, Israel would engage in a succession of conflicts with its Arab neighbors.”

The word “engage” obscures the fact that Arab countries and terrorists repeatedly attacked with the intent to destroy Israel, forcing Israel to defend itself. Obama fails to note that Israel had pleaded with Jordan not to enter the 1967 War or that Jordan had occupied and annexed the West Bank in 1950 in violation of international law. Most importantly, Obama omits mention of Israel’s willingness to withdraw from all the areas that it won in its defensive battle in exchange for peace in the aftermath of its victory. Nor does he tell of the Arab League’s “Three No’s” in response to that offer: no peace with Israel, no recognition of Israel, and no negotiations with Israel. As Lipman puts it, “This omission serves once again to portray Israel as the aggressive occupier that seeks conflict and not peace.”

Example 4:

The “rise of the PLO (the Palestinian Liberation Organization)” was a result of the Six-Day War.”

False. The PLO was established in 1964, three years before there were any settlements. What was the PLO fighting to liberate if there were no settlements? The answer is obvious: they wanted to destroy Israel. This historical context debunks the claim that Israeli settlements are the root of the conflict.

For that matter Obama fails to mention that Israel unilaterally pulled out of Gaza in 2005, uprooting Jewish communities, only to have Hamas use it as a launching pad for terrorist attacks. Even more troubling is the claim of “Israeli Apache helicopters leveling entire neighborhoods [in Gaza].” The word “leveling” conjures up images of indiscriminate bombing. On the contrary, at a rally in support of Israel during the 2014 Gaza War, Delaware Senator Chris Coons lauded Israel for its efforts to minimize collateral damage. Among other precautions, Israel air drops leaflets warning Palestinians to vacate an area before striking. This humanitarian practice makes the IDF’s job more difficult, considering that Hamas uses human shields and launches missiles from civilian areas such as hospitals. Lipman points out that mentioning Israel’s use of Apache helicopters appears to be “a subtle or not-too-subtle question of whether the United States should be providing Israel with military aid if it is used in this manner.”

Example 5:

“Arafat demanded more concessions, however, and the [Camp David] talks collapsed into recrimination.”

In 2001 Newsweek reported that Bill Clinton told Arafat “I’m a colossal failure, and you made me one.” This referred to Arafat’s abandonment of the 2000 Camp David talks, which opened with Ehud Barak’s offer to concede 96% of the West Bank. Clinton was squarely blaming Arafat for the failure of the talks.

Sixty days later, Arafat unleashed the Second Intifada, in which 1,137 Israelis were killed and 8,341 were maimed. The pretext for the terror campaign was Interior Minister Ariel Sharon’s visit to the Temple Mount.

Obama describes the Temple Mount as “one of Islam’s holy sites.” This is true, but Obama doesn’t mention that it is also Judaism’s holiest site. The fact that it is a Jewish holy site as well certainly makes Sharon’s actions more understandable, even if one disagrees with the wisdom of such a visit. Furthermore, there is no mention that the visit only occurred after Israel’s Interior Ministry received assurances from the security chief of the Palestinian Authority that the visit would not ignite a conflict. This context is crucial to understanding that Sharon’s trip was not the true cause of the second Intifada, but only a pretext. Mamduh Nofal, former military commander of the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine, revealed that, following Camp David, “Arafat told us, ‘Now we are going to fight, so we must be ready.’ ”

Providing a historical narrative that will be read by millions gives one the ability to shape the way history is understood. President Obama's historical account is misleading and requires much correction. Just as Judah stepped forward to defend Benjamin, the only brother born in the land that would become *Eretz Yisrael* (the Land of Israel), we must step forward and correct the record regarding Israel's history.