Israel: A Concise History of a Nation Reborn

TRIALS AND DEBATES:
SUGGESTIONS FOR CLASSROOM DISCUSSIONS

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This brief guide, intended primarily for teachers, is a supplement to the “Guide for Readers, Book Clubs and Discussion Groups,” also available for downloading. The pages that follow make use of a variation on an educational technique called the Jewish Court of All Time.* The goal of the technique, now used in many educational settings, is to bring history to life by having students conduct “trials” or “debates” as if they are now facing issues and having to make decisions on critical questions that leaders in former periods had to face.

Students should be encouraged to seek information from a variety of sources. Even if they are beginning with Israel: A Concise History of a Nation Reborn, using the myriad sources available online will likely deepen their understanding of each issue and enable them to become much more active learners than would otherwise be the case.

The following are but a few examples of how trials and debates might bring to life the material found in Israel: A Concise History of a Nation Reborn. Teachers, group leaders and students themselves will easily come up with many other possible “trials and debates” based on the material in the book.

Introduction: A Grand Human Story

Chapter 1: Poetry and Politics—The Jewish Nation Seeks a Home

Should the new society emerging in Palestine be an interfaith society or a distinctly Jewish one?

In his utopian novel, Altneuland, Theodor Herzl describes the future society in Palestine as an interfaith society (pg. 29). Was that a good idea? Should Israel be a distinctly Jewish state, in which the needs and priorities of the Jewish people are top priority, or should Israel emulate Herzl’s vision (at least as it appears in Altneuland) and be a more universalist country?

* The program is the creation of three professors, Dr. Jeff Stanzler (University of Michigan-Ann Arbor), Dr. Michael Fahy (Project Director at Proxima) and Dr. Jeff Kupperman (University of Michigan-Flint).
Chapter 2: Some Spot of Native Land—The Jewish Roots of Zionism

Should the Jews resume their role as actors in history and seek to create a state?
The biblical prophets, Jeremiah and Hananiah, debated whether Jews should “become accustomed to life in exile, or insist on getting back to their land as quickly as they possibly could” (pg. 38). Judaism survived for thousands of years because Jews learned to live in the Diaspora. Did Zionism destroy that ability? Would it have been wiser and healthier for the Jewish people to remain exclusively in the Diaspora?

Chapter 3: A Conversation, Not an Ideology—Zionism Divisions at the Turn of the Century

Should the Zionists accept the British offer of the Uganda Plan?
Would it have been possible to create the Jewish state somewhere other than Palestine? Would it have been a good idea?

Should the Zionists seek a sovereign state or a Jewish spiritual center in Palestine?
Theodore Herzl and Ahad Ha’am disagreed as to what the ultimate goal of Zionism should be. Herzl believed that the Jews needed a sovereign state, while Ahad Ha’am argued that sovereignty was less important than establishing a Jewish spiritual center in Palestine. Who was right? Who ultimately won? If the Jewish people had to make such a decision today, which would you advocate?

Chapter 4: From Abstract Dream to First Glimmers of Reality—A Jewish Revival in Palestine

Should Kibbutz Degania exile Rachel Bluwstein (Rachel the Poet)?
This chapter uses the story of the Rachel the Poet to portray the tensions between the collective and the individual in Zionist history and ideology. Was the kibbutz right to exile her? What alternatives did it have? Has Zionism’s collectivist ideology served Israel well or has it proven harmful?

Should Hebrew become the official language of the Zionist movement?
How critical was Hebrew to Zionism and to the revival of the Jewish people? Could Zionism have succeeded had Israel chosen a different language? Was Ben-Yehuda’s work about communication or about something deeper? If the latter, what was the real goal of his project?

Chapter 5: The Balfour Declaration—The Empire Endorses the State

What should be the anthem of the emerging country?
Does Betar’s anthem (pg. 106) better reflect the character of the Jewish state than “Hatikva”?
What about Psalm 126, which many early Zionists advocated? Which characteristics of a country should an anthem highlight? History and yearning? Or war and battle?
In 2016, the Palestinian Authority announced that it was going to sue the United Kingdom for having issued the Balfour Declaration.

If you were among Palestinian policy-makers, would you advocate taking this step or not, and why? If you were working in the Israeli Foreign Ministry, what would you say Israel’s response should be?

Chapter 6: Nowhere To Go, Even if They Could Leave—The Second World War and the Holocaust

How should various players in the Yishuv react to Arlosoroff’s “transfer agreement?”

What was the better course of action in dealing with Germany: Arlosoroff’s transfer agreement or an economic boycott? Was it better to get Jews out of Germany but appease the Germans or to isolate Germany?

Should the Jews accept the Peel Commission division of the land, or bargain for more?”

"[The Jews] would be fools not to accept it, even if it were the size of a tablecloth” (pg. 123), said Weizmann. At that time, should the Jews have accepted any deal offered to them, or should they have bargained for a larger portion of land? Would a Jewish state created in the borders that the Peel Commission recommended have been viable?

Chapter 7: The Yishuv Resists the British, the Arabs Battle Partition

Is the large number of Arabs in the land slated to become the Jewish state a problem? If so, how should the Yishuv deal with it?

Ben-Gurion hoped that Operation Dalet would encourage Arabs to leave the state. Was it necessary to have a Jewish majority for the state to succeed? Was it worth the cost? If the new state had not had a Jewish majority, could it have remained democratic?

Chapter 8: Independence—The State Is Born

Should David Ben-Gurion give the order to fire on the Altalena and sink it?

It can be argued that the Altalena event gave the government and the IDF their de-facto legitimacy because it made clear that the government would control the military and there would be only one military in the new state. Did the Altalena event need to happen? Was it worth the price? Was there another way to make the same point?

Should Holocaust survivors be exempt from being sent into battle in the War of Independence?

Should Israel have treated Holocaust survivors differently than it did other immigrants? Should Ben-Gurion have done more to protect them or was he correct to put them directly into battle? Was he right that the war effort had to take precedence?
Chapter 9: From Dreams of a State to the Reality of Statehood

What are the main issues Israel’s constitution should address? What should it say about them?

Draft a tentative constitution that you think would address the most critical issues. What about Israel’s current system needs to be changed? What will you keep?

Chapter 10: Israel enters the International Arena—The Sinai Campaign of 1956

Should Israel cooperate with England and France and launch the Sinai Campaign?

The agreement gave Israel the sense that it was not alone in the world, while also demonstrating the power of the Jews. Israel was willing to pay a physical price for a political gain. Was it worth the risk? Was the international recognition worth the lives lost in this operation? Should the state’s collective vision come before the safety of the individual?

Chapter 11: Israel Confronts the Holocaust

Should Israel capture Adolph Eichmann in a foreign country? Should Israel insist on trying him in Jerusalem?

In retrospect, should Israel have prosecuted Adolf Eichmann? Was this a legitimate extension of Israel’s judicial power? Was the price Israel paid in the international arena worth the opportunity for justice?

Should Israel accept German reparations?

Who was right, Ben-Gurion or Begin? Could Israel have survived economically without them? Was Begin correct that accepting German reparations is appalling? To what extend did Israel sacrifice its honor for economic prosperity? Was there another way?

Is Rudolph Kasztner a hero or a villain?

How should he be treated? He made a deal with the Germans that saved thousands of Jewish lives; but was he complicit in the deaths of those he chose not to save? Should Kasztner have been punished or revered?

Chapter 12: Six Days of War Change a Country Forever

Should Israel press the battle and capture the Old City?

In retrospect, should Israel have reclaimed the Old City of Jerusalem during the war? How would you define the “value” that the Old City has for Israel? Would the conflict be different today if Jerusalem were still divided?
Chapter 13: The Burden of Occupation

*Should Israel return the territories to the Arabs immediately after the 1967 war?*
What would be different today had Israel done that? What would be better? What would be worse? Is there a third alternative that Israel should have pursued? What would have been best for Israel’s soul?

Chapter 14: The Yom Kippur War—The “Conception” Crashes

*Should Golda Meir permit Nachum Goldman to negotiate with Sadat?*
Should Israel have taken Egypt’s gestures more seriously? Could the war have been avoided? What would have changed? Conversely, was Golda Meir wise to be skeptical of these proposals? What might have gone wrong had a peace agreement between Israel and Egypt emerged?

Chapter 15: Revolution within the Revolution—The Rise and Revenge of Israel’s Political Right

*With the North under attack, should Begin launch the war against southern Lebanon?*
Was it a mistake to launch the operation that led to the Lebanon War? What was gained? What was lost? Would Israel be better or worse off (international reputation, national morale, terror, etc.) if it had never happened? How would Israel be different today if it had not entered Lebanon in 1982?

Chapter 16: Taking a Page from the Zionists—The Rise of Palestinian Nationalism

*Should Israel sign the Oslo Accords?*
Knowing what we know today, what would you advocate if you were present as the accords were being worked on? Did the Oslo Accords ultimately move the peace process forward or backwards? What were its successes and missteps? Where would Israel be today if the Oslo Accords had never been put in effect?

Chapter 17: The Peace Process Stalls

*Should Israel construct the wall between the West Bank and the rest of Israel?*
Evaluate the positive and negative outcomes of the wall separating the West Bank from the rest of Israel. It stunted terror attacks but aroused international condemnation and concerns about Israel’s moral compass. Was it ultimately a good thing for Israel? Was there another way to reduce the number of terror attacks?

*Should Israel conduct a unilateral withdrawal from Gaza?*
In hindsight, should Israel have withdrawn from Gaza? Did the withdrawal move the peace
process forward or backwards? What were the costs and benefits? Would Israel be in a better or worse position today if Gaza were still occupied?

Chapter 18: A Jewish Renaissance in the Jewish State

Bottom line, what should be Jewish about the Jewish State?
Should the State of Israel be Jewish at its core? Would Israel continue to be a safe haven for Jews if it didn't have a Jewish core? Should a national religion have strict boundaries? If so, what should those boundaries be?

Conclusion: A Century after Balfour—“A National Home for the Jewish People”

What is the most important thing Israel needs to do to ensure its future? What are the two most important things? The three most important things?
Are you optimistic that Israel will do them? Do you think that Israel can do them? How optimistic are you about Israel's future? Short term? Long term?