



## How Israel Lost: The Four Questions

*Richard Ben Cramer*

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## **How Israel Lost: The Four Questions** Richard Ben Cramer

In *How Israel Lost* Richard Ben Cramer analyzes the four questions that have bedeviled Israel and Palestine for almost forty years:

- I. Why do we care about Israel?
- II. Why don't the Palestinians have a state?
- III. What is a Jewish state?
- IV. Why is there no peace?

Cramer illustrates how Israel is losing her soul by maintaining her occupation of the lands conquered in the Six Day War. Israel has become a victim of that occupation no less than the Palestinians, who must have a nation of their own.

Both his observations and argument are drawn with startling clarity, informed by the fierce and fearless reporting that won him the Pulitzer Prize for Middle East coverage.

## **How Israel Lost: The Four Questions Details**

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## Lboogiepeace says

anyone who is interested in a clever writer's perspective on "The Conflict" should check this out.

**Niels Lodewijk says**

With this book Cremer won the Pulitzer prize, a brilliant book. With four basic questions Cremer tries to illustrate the situation in Israel. In a nutshell, it comes down to: Israel has become a victim (tribalism, aggression) of its own policy and it's questionable if they will ever get out of this. Cremer doesn't fear sacred cows in his book. Cremer interviewed a lot of different individuals (makes the book personal) and uses a wide range of references. He pictures Jews as well as Palestinians and you will start out liking and disliking both sides. Sometimes he is a bit cynical in his writing, but I like this style.

**???? ????? says**

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<http://www.eda2a.com/news.php?id=26963>

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book because first, the writer is a Jewish and an American journalist who lived for a long time in both Israel and Palestine. Secondly, I am interested in Judaism studies and culture. The book gave me kind of an overview on Jewish values and principles. Cramer primarily discuss four important questions:

I. Why do we (American) care about Israel?

II. Why don't the Palestinians have a state?

III. What is a Jewish state?

IV. Why is there no peace?

I was very curious to know the reason behind American enormous support for Israel and I found out from this book that Israel existence is very important for American Christians because it prepares for the second coming of Christ. According to Cramer: "The bible says that the second coming of Christ will require that the Jews be "ingathered" again in Zion, which will bring on Armageddon, which will cause Jesus to return. There's also a political meeting of the minds, going back to the days when the Christian right saw Israel as a brave anti-Soviet outpost of Judeo-Christian values"

I thought it is interesting to know that Israeli society is split over between religious and secular Jews (It seems that there is always a fight between religious and secular people in every society in this world!!) In addition, Israel's society is divided into tribes like, the Ramat Hasharon tribe, the tribe of the Russians, the tribe of the Old Left, and the tribe of the settlers and the old Right Wing and finally the tribe of Haredim. Cramer thinks that "Some of this tribalization did come to Israel from outside- from other Western societies. The Zionist state has always been kind of trendy in its social engineering. Zionism itself was just a Jewish version of European nineteenth century nationalism"

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### **John Matthew says**

p. 146: The Israelis by Amos Elon

p. 155: 1949 by Tom Segev

p. 165: Haredim are more a menace than Arabs.

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### **Nathan Tenney says**

Pretty good book from topics of Israel's past, present, and future. Has some surprisingly good humor mixed throughout, and has a bunch of testimonials and eyewitness stories. Some sources and opinions are a little biased, but overall adds more sustenance to Israeli culture and history.

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### **Jamila says**

While the title may seem off putting to some, the book is an incredibly sympathetic portrait of the

complexities of life in Israel and Palestine. Government, be it Israel or the PLO, are the real bad guys here who choose to exploit the conflict for profit and continued power with devastating consequences for the people they purport to serve.

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## **Mary Erickson says**

American author Richard Ben Cramer won the Pulitzer Prize for International Reporting in 1979 for his reporting in the Middle East. 20 years later he was asked by his publisher to write on the current situation in Israel (current in 2004 when this book was published). He organizes his thoughts around 4 key questions: Why do we care about Israel? Why don't the Palestinians have a state? What is a Jewish state? Why is there no peace?

In a breezy tone he gives his analysis why the occupation endures and how it "corrupts and corrodes the societies of both Arab and Jew." Some of the details are dated (e.g., Arafat is now dead and other mafia-dons run Gaza), but the basic situation is still the same. I've done other reading on modern Israel in preparation for a trip, so this might be a difficult book without any other background, but it was a fast read and provided lots of interesting discussion points. I liked the author's style and strong opinions, even if I didn't always agree. (Cramer himself died in 2004 from lung cancer.)

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## **Brian says**

First thing I have to note is that the book is written in an *extremely* conversational tone. Em dashes and parentheses litter the pages, and there are some places where it looks like Cramer threw some salt down on the page and put in an ellipsis wherever more than one grain hit. It's very distracting in the beginning, but I got used to it relatively quickly. Others may not be so lucky.

Anyway, Cramer was a journalist in the Middle East for decades, and has seen quite a lot during that time. The book is mostly about how Israeli society has changed during the time that he's been covering it, and that basically all comes back to the Occupation. The Occupation was originally a response to Israel's surprising victory in the Six-Day War, but since then, nearly every aspect of Israeli politics has been defined by their relation to the occupied territories. Generals fill the Prime Ministership, the cabinet positions, and even the CEOships of major companies. The question of security dominates the national discourse. And despite a majority of Israelis who say they want peace and are willing to give up land to get it, governments who have a de facto policy of maintaining Greater Israel keep getting elected.

One of the reasons he gives for this is that Occupation has systematically brutalized Israeli society. Everyone has to serve in the military (except the Haredim, which Cramer points out causes fractures all its own--majorities of secular Israelis say the Ultra Orthodox are more dangerous to the state than the Palestinians), and most of those have to serve in the Occupied Territories. While there, they're basically encouraged to treat the Palestinians as second class citizens--or, to be more accurate, as a conquered people--and then that attitude persists when they return to civilian life. And everyone in the society has gone through that.

After a bombing of a Hamas chief in his apartment building, which also killed over a dozen people, Ha'aretz interviewed a pilot, and one of the things he said was this:

But if you nevertheless want to know what I feel when I release a bomb, I will tell you: I feel a

light bump to the plane as a result of the bomb's release. A second later it's gone, and that's all.  
That's what I feel.  
-Dan Halutz

So, it's not really having a healthy effect on society.

The Occupation is having the same effect on the Palestinians as well. Even beyond the obvious effects of collateral damage from Israeli assassinations, checkpoints, walls cutting off farmers from their land, etc., Cramer discusses how Palestinian society is still a tribal, honor-based culture, which affects both the reason why their leadership seems so ineffective (much of the budget goes into payments for people's families, sinecure positions, and pure graft) and one of the reasons why the peace plans seem to be going nowhere. What does "97% of mandate Palestine" mean when the remaining 3% are roads that carve up the West Bank into tiny Bantustans and leave the checkpoints in place?

I originally thought about whether to shelve this on my Judaism shelf or not, but in the end, I had to do so. After all, one of the four questions that Cramer asks is "What is a Jewish state?" According to Cramer, one of Israel's major problems is that it's simultaneously trying to define itself as a modern democratic state and as a state based on ethnic affiliation, and the two are incompatible. A modern democratic state would mean that the Palestinians get a vote, and that would mean the end of the Jewish state.

This is not a hopeful book, as you may have been able to tell from the title. At the end, Cramer mentions that some of his friends in Israel seemed to think that a corner had been turned in the process, and that a light was around the corner. As the last eight years have shown, though, they were wrong, and part of the reason is that everyone in power benefits from the current situations. Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and the rest of the political Islam groups don't want peace, because then their reason for existence goes away. The PLO doesn't want it, because then they can't blame their problems on Israel and might actually have to spend money on infrastructure instead of graft and their own bank accounts. And the Israeli government doesn't want it, because then they can't use the threat of terrorism to distract Israelis from domestic problems (did you hear about the 2011 housing protests? I bet you didn't) and because at the moment, they're getting everything they want. The Palestinians are divided, the settlements keep increasing, and their policy of soft ethnic cleansing will eventually give them their Greater Israel, if it doesn't utterly ruin Israeli society first. Why change?

Why indeed. The book's title refers mostly to how Israel lost the world's opinion, going from the survivors of horrible oppression to being seen as oppressors themselves, but there's not much in here to indicate that anything will change any time soon. If you're looking for a way forward, you won't find it here, but it's a good account of why things are the way they are and why change seems so difficult and so far away.

Note: For those who aren't aware, these are the real Four Questions.

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### **Sam Lindsay-levine says**

A cutting, incisive, sad, but breezy (maybe a little much so) look into the situation and character of the state of Israel, particularly regarding its decades-long military occupation (and now blockade), coming from a Pulitzer-winning Middle East journalist. Definitely recommended.

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## **Chad Donnick says**

I've always meant to learn more about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. I've been rather ignorant about it and therefore haven't had an opinion either way (which is still better than blindly supporting one side or the other).

One book does not an expert make, but I saw this book as a rather balanced primer. The last two sections ("What is a Jewish State?" and "Why is there no peace?") had the most impact on me. I still don't know exactly where I stand - probably somewhere in the middle, seeing both sides as well as the international community as having faults - but I do know that I want to learn more.

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