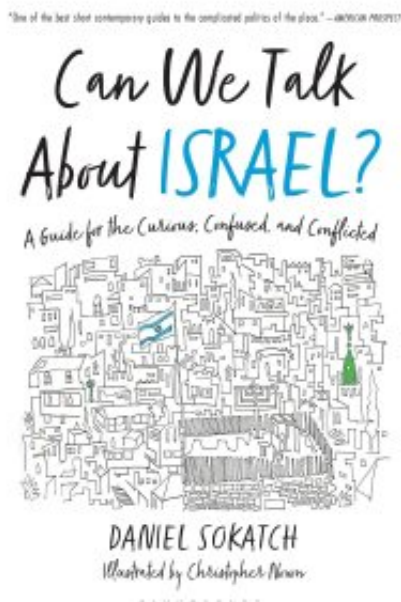


# Can We Talk About Israel? by Daniel Sokatch

by Rev. Joe Dirt - Saturday, October 28, 2023

<https://curmudgeon-alley.com/can-we-talk-about-israel-by-daniel-sokatch/>



## Why I Read This Book

This book, *Can We Talk About Israel?*, is subtitled, *A Guide for the Curious, Confused and Conflicted*, which is a good summary of most folks position and feelings about Israel. We received two copies of this book as part of the pre-tour preparation of our now cancelled two week visit to Israel with side trips to Jordan and Egypt. What is it they say? Timing is everything. Also as part of that preparation Señora and I watched two Wondrium courses that I can whole-heartedly recommend:

[The World of Biblical Israel](#) taught by a graduate of Harvard Divinity School, [Cynthia R. Chapman](#), Th.D. Using the Bible as a framework Chapman ties in historical and archeological records to support its narrative. She also points out when they do not support the Biblical story. She also ties together the varied religious influences, including non-Abrahamic religions, that influenced those who wrote the Bible. I learned a great deal about the Babylonian exile of the Jews, a subject of which I had only sketchy knowledge.

[The Holy Land Revealed](#) taught by [Jodi Magness](#), Ph.D. Using mainly the Bible and the works of the Roman historian Josephus as source materials, Magness explores various archeological sites around the Holy Land and their significance to the Biblical narrative.

## Not a Book Review

This is not so much a review of this recently published book, but more of a recommendation of something

to read if you are indeed curious, confused or conflicted about Israel. [Sokatch](#) has a very accessible writing style which eased the intellectual exploration of this important and tortured land and its history. Sokatch is an American Jew who has spent much time in Israel, and he obviously has a great love for Israel and its various peoples. He is currently head of the [New Israel Fund](#), an organization dedicated to equality and democracy for all Israelis, not just Jews. Importantly, for me, is that this is not a one sided book pushing an only Jewish point of view. He endeavors to give all sides of this seemingly intractable situation. I have long felt that in regards to the Jewish/Palestinian state of affairs that both sides are right and both sides are wrong. This book reinforced my belief. If one feels that one side is more right or more wrong is often dependent on your religious beliefs, cultural background, or where you live.

## Diving to The Nut of The Matter

For me the key take-away of this book was what has been termed the [David Ben-Gurion](#) triangle. Everything else in the book was history and commentary on how Israel and the Middle East arrived at this impasse and commentary why they have stayed deadlocked. Israel as a modern country is barely older than me, having been declared and accepted (by most of the world) as a nation in 1948. Israel began impinging on my early consciousness in the mid to late 60s and early 70s. A pretty good trick given all that was happening on the home front, the fight for Afro-American civil rights, the war in Vietnam, hippies and free love, one failed administration after another... Most pronounced – until now – was the [Six-Day War](#) fought between Israel and a coalition of Arab states that included Egypt, Jordan and Syria.

Shortly after the Six-Day War, a former Prime Minister and Founding Father of Israel, David Ben-Gurion, came out of retirement to express the opinion that Israel should not keep the territories that it has just conquered. It was not a popular viewpoint. He went on to explain his position by what has become known as the David Ben-Gurion triangle. Essentially there were three legs to this triangle as expressed by Ben-Gurion:

Israel was a majority Jewish state

Israel was a democracy

Israel held all this new territory populated by non-Jewish peoples

Israel could choose two of the three, but only two. What they chose would determine – and did – the future of the country. As expressed in the book, *“If Israel annexed the new territories and made the Palestinians it now ruled full citizens, it risked losing its Jewish majority. If it formally incorporated the territories into Israel and denied the Palestinians citizenship, it would no longer be a democracy. The third choice, the only choice as far as Ben-Gurion was concerned, was to remain a democracy and a Jewish state. And the only way to do that was to get rid of the territories.”* Unfortunately, that is not what Israel chose to do. And here we are today, more violence, more deaths, and another war.

## A Book in Two Parts

Part one, which is most of the book, deals with the history of Israel, starting in Biblical times, rushing through what is familiar to most of us, finally slowing down in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century with the rise of [Zionism](#). Zionism is the movement that pushed for a Jewish homeland in the traditional region of what is, more or less, modern Israel. My personal take is that Zionism was the result of the Jewish belief that God had promised this land to them, and the virulent anti-Semitism that was only to get worse. As an aside, at

least a few scholars trace this anti-Semitism back to the foundational, Christian theologian, [St. Augustine](#).

As more and more Jews began to settle in what was Palestine, and as their numbers grew, the Palestinians became increasingly alarmed. Shortly after World War I Palestine became a British protectorate and remained so until modern Israel became a nation. When violence broke out between the more radical factions of Jews and Palestinians, the British fought on the side of the Jews. The numbers of European Jews migrating to Palestine became a flood after World War II. Finally in 1948, with the blessing of the United Nations, Israel was proclaimed a nation. My personal opinion is that this was, at least, in part, a reaction to the world's guilt over the Holocaust and many countries, including the United States, failure to aid Jews fleeing Hitler and the Nazis. Sigh.

The rest of part one read like a refresher of the news articles of the past 70 years. Most of the items I had at least an awareness of, but I learned about many others that somehow had escaped my attention. One thing that I knew, but had forgotten, was the Israeli foundational tenet of the [Law of Return](#). That is Jews from wherever, with some proof, have the absolute right to migrate to Israel. This is a good news, bad news story as the country was founded with mostly [Ashkenazi](#) Jews and now there was a wave after wave of Jews of different backgrounds and races. This diversity has been trying for the newly formed state. Most importantly, for the current arc of the story, is the large migration of Jews from Russia and eastern Europe who do not have a tradition of democracy, thus explaining, in part, Israel's hard turn to the right.

Sokatch also touched on how Israel has been moving away from American Jews, who for the most part are liberal. Only 10 percent of American Jews identify as Orthodox, most are Reformed or non-religious. In their place the right wing Israelis have partnered (cynically?) with Fundamentalist American Christians, most of whom view Israel's rebirth as a precursor to the second coming of Christ. Yet another sigh.

I will have to admit that after reading part one I was dismayed and discouraged about Israel moving forward as a democracy and as a good neighbor in that part of the world. Part two was an attempt to reverse course a bit and bring some hope back into the picture. Truthfully, Sokatch failed at that as I could not shake the feelings I had from part one.

## **An Ironic Aside**

As a bit of yet another aside, we had received an email from the tour organizers on Friday, October 6<sup>th</sup>, asking if we wanted to add a side trip into the West Bank to learn the Palestinian side of the situation. Saturday morning *Señora* woke me up saying that Israel was at war. On October 9th they officially cancelled our trip as many airlines had stopped flying into Tel Aviv. We had emotionally cancelled the trip that Saturday morning.

## **An Important Book to Read**

This is an easy book to read due to the author's style. It is a hard book to read as it does nothing to ease the mental dis-ease of the ongoing, intractable problems of this region of the world which have only gotten worse since I put the book down. However, I think it is an important book that anyone with even a vague interest in Israel, the Occupied Territories and the current situation should read.

Obviously the book is available at many sellers, including [Amazon](#). My library has the book in three formats, standard print, eBook and audio book. Yours probably does too.

And so it very sadly goes.

[Subscribe to Curmudgeon Alley](#)