



Israel Is Real: An Obsessive Quest to Understand the Jewish Nation and Its History

Rich Cohen

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"It's a great irony that Israel was more secure as an idea than it's ever been as a nation with an army."

In AD 70, when the Second Temple was destroyed, a handful of visionaries saved Judaism by reinventing it—by taking what had been a national religion, identified with a particular place, and turning it into an idea. Jews no longer needed Jerusalem to be Jews. Whenever a Jew studied—wherever he was—he would be in the holy city. In this way, a few rabbis turned a real city into a city of the mind; in this way, they turned the Temple into a book and preserved their faith. Though you can burn a city, you cannot sack an idea or kill a book. But in our own time, Zionists have turned the book back into a

temple. And unlike an idea, a temple can be destroyed. The creation of Israel has made Jews vulnerable in a way they have not been for two thousand years.

In *Israel Is Real*, Rich Cohen's superb new history of the Zionist idea and the Jewish state—the history of a nation chronicled as if it were the biography of a person—he brings to life dozens of fascinating figures, each driven by the same impulse: to reach Jerusalem. From false messiahs such as David Alroy (Cohen calls him the first superhero, with his tallis as a cape) and Sabbatai Zevi, who led thousands on a mad spiritual journey, to the early Zionists (many of them failed journalists), to the iconic figures of modern Jewish Sparta, David Ben-Gurion, Golda Meir, Yitzhak Rabin, and Ariel Sharon, Cohen shows how all these lives together form a single story, a single life. In this unique book, Cohen examines the myth of the wandering Jew, the paradox of Jewish power (how can you be both holy and nuclear?), and the triumph and tragedy of the Jewish state—how the creation of modern Israel has changed what it means to be a Jew anywhere.



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