This book discusses the connection between the Shoah and the foundation of the State of Israel, analyzing in chronological order its influence and its social, political and educational legacy. The focus here is on Israeli state and society and, from this perspective, this text represents a welcome addition to the literature on the Shoah, even though it does not present particularly new or innovative elements. This theme and its implications have in fact been addressed before in other scholarly studies, as the references - detailed in the footnotes - in the book indeed confirm.

The main question underlying the whole book, and which runs through its various chapters is whether Israel was born because of the Shoah, or rather, notwithstanding its devastation and impact, from the point of view of demography, culture and population. Bensoussan entirely rejects the idea that the State of Israel was born because of thanks to the feelings of guilt of the international community, while he underlines the reasons of realpolitik which stood behind its foundation. On the one hand, the USSR was interested in having a base in the Middle East that could be useful (and eventually used) to penetrate the area; on the other, Harry Truman was reluctant to alienate the sympathies of US Jewry in the wake of two important elections: the election for New York mayor (1946) and, more notably, the presidential elections of 1948. In claiming that no evidence is to be found in archival sources to support the thesis of the guilt feelings of the international community as a factor prompting the foundation of the State of Israel, Bensoussan actually seems to follow into the footsteps of Arie Kochavi’s, Post-Holocaust politics: Britain, the United States & Jewish refugees, 1945-1948 (2001), even though this work does not appear to be quoted. On the contrary, the Author seems to support the idea that the State of Israel came into being despite and notwithstanding the Shoah, even if such a catastrophic event indeed jeopardized the possibility of Israel’s coming into existence, for example if considering the potential number of immigrants from Eastern Europe. And here emerges one of the founding ideas of the Author’s construction, i.e. that the structures of the would-be State of Israel – mainly the Histadrut, the Hagana, and the Hebrew University, as well as a fully organized educational system (and a networked medical system, the reviewers add) - already existed as national realities before the war (chapter 1, p. 12). This initial focus on the pre-statehood period is here not only acknowledged but also welcomed as a further contribution to a long-term history approach for the State of Israel, one that could also explain how the State of Israel could be “up and running on the 15 May 1948”, to use an expression by David Vital.

The Author’s initial focus on the pre-statehood period (the Yishuv) is not only important to substantiate the thesis that there existed a quasi-State before May 1948, but also because the structures that are highlighted as already existing in the Yishuv period (Histadrut, Haganah, Hebrew University) were fundamental in the creation of the State of Israel. The connection between the Shoah and the foundation of the State of Israel is thus not only seen as a result of the devastation and consequence of the events of the Holocaust, but also as a factor that contributed to the establishment of the State. This perspective is strengthened by the emphasis on the role of realpolitik in the decision-making processes related to the foundation of the State of Israel, rather than the supposed guilt feelings of the international community.

In conclusion, Bensoussan’s book provides a comprehensive analysis of the connection between the Shoah and the foundation of the State of Israel, offering new insights and perspectives on this complex historical issue. It is a valuable contribution to the literature on the Shoah and the State of Israel, offering a nuanced understanding of the factors that contributed to the founding of the State of Israel.
15th 1948; it is also central to the economy of a book on the relation between Shoah and Israel. The Author investigates in fact the question of haavara, i.e. the agreement between the Yishuv and the Nazi government to let German Jews migrate to British Palestine already in the 1930s bringing with them financial assets (up to 20,000 DM) (chapter 2, p. 21). Diaspora Jewry almost unanimously condemned such an agreement, and even stronger was the condemnation issued by Zeev Jabotinsky, the founder of right-wing Zionism, who accused David Ben-Gurion and the Labour political leadership of the Yishuv to collaborate with the enemy. This argument entails the corollary that Ben Gurion's political aim was not that of saving European Jews but rather that of establishing the State, a topic that has been addressed and discussed also by Tom Segev in his well known The Seventh Million (1993), a book which is often referred to in the footnotes of this work. If Ben Gurion’s political actions were informed by an approach of realpolitik before the war, as the works of Segev and of Idit Zertal (also frequently quoted in the book under review) have demonstrated, they even more so followed this method in the early 1950s, when the question of German reparations emerged in the Israeli political discourse. Once again, the need to grant economic survival to Israel after the 1948 War (which had led the country to the verge of an economic collapse) prevailed over moral considerations, and thus came the acceptance of German reparations over the option of not establishing relations with Germany (chapter 4, p. 109).

Related to this question is also how the Yishuv - and then Israeli society - dealt with Shoah survivors, both collectively, individually and within families, an attitude that can be broadly summarized as rejection. As it is well known, there was very little public space for Shoah survivors in Israel, and their voice was unheard, if not silenced, at least until the Eichmann trial (1961). Relying on literature works such as David Grossman’s See Under: Love, Bensoussan addresses this complex issue, that of the survivors’ guilt feelings, and the question of the trans-generational transmission of trauma in the private and in the public spheres. A quote at p. 54, taken from the literary work of Aharon Megged, well exemplifies the complexity of the themes and their intertwining through the refusal of Raya, an Israeli-born young would-be mother who strongly refuses to name her to-be-born son after Mendele, her cousin died in the Shoah. This story also exemplifies the stand taken by the new generations born in Israel to cut ties with a Diaspora which in the 1950s and 1960s was still conceptualized in Israel as a solely negative experience, destined to failure and to cause its members destruction, either by death or assimilation.

It was not only Raya who rejected the Shoah, with its individual and collective horrors: Raya embodied the Israeli ethos towards this issue of her times, as it developed in the early decades of statehood. As the parliamentary debates on the establishment of a day to commemorate the Shoah in Israel in 1953 testify, it was also the Israeli establishment which contributed in no small measure to reject the Jewish experience during the Shoah, and to legitimize the (in)famous parallel with the flock being led to slaughter (chapter 3, p. 83). This image
stood in stark contrast to the Israeli model of fighting Jew and seems to be well summarized in the famous poem My little sister by Itzhak Sadeh (the founder of the Palmach), which is quoted also in Zertal (Des rescapés pour un État. La politique sioniste d'immigrations clandestine en Palestine, 1945-1948, 2000). Here are summed up the main themes recurring in the encounter between Shoah survivors and Palestinian Jews immediately after 1945 (pp. 51-52), i.e. the stereotyped idea that highlights the masculine traits of the new Jew versus the feminine passivity of the entire Diaspora, which brought, as a result, to the gas chambers.

Chapter 5 addresses the event considered as a turning point in the relations between Israel and the Shoah, i.e., the Eichmann trial. The chapter is in fact entitled “The decisive years”; as it is widely known, it was in fact during and after the Eichmann trial that the Shoah survivors were finally allowed to emerge from the privacy of their trauma into the public sphere (p. 138). By broadly referring to the work of Anita Shapira, Bensoussan indicates in the Eichmann court hearings “the return of the Israeli identity to the Jewish people” (p. 138), the one event that questioned the ways in which Israeli society and institutions had accepted (or rather rejected) the survivors of the Shoah and dealt with their memories. This was the moment in which Israel as a society internalized a genocide which, from that moment onwards, was extended as a part and parcel of the Jewish Diaspora experience, regardless of where it had taken place, including Arab countries.

Another fundamental topic of this book, which has been already discussed quite extensively by historiography, is the so called ‘calendar of memory’, i.e. the sequence of national and religious holidays which connects the Shoah and uprising of the Warsaw Ghetto (Yom ha-Shoah ve-hagevura; the day of Shoah and heroism), the national memorial day (Yom ha-Zicharon) and Independence Day (Yom Atzmaut), three commemorations which are framed in a time the year celebrating the holiday of Jewish freedom par excellence, Passover. The ‘calendar of memory’ is discussed in chapter 3 (pp. 77-79), in chapter 4 (p. 113) and is briefly mentioned again in chapter 5 (p. 149), a spreading out which does not help the reader to navigate its way through this particular topic. A similar criticism can be raised for the way the Author addresses the debates and issues raised by the construction of Yad Vashem (chapter 3, pp. 80-81; chapter 4, p. 101, 113; chapter 6, pp. 153-154).

Finally, the educational and political use and misuse of the Shoah is the main theme addressed by Bensoussan in the last pages of chapter 5 and in chapter 6. Proceeding in chronological order, the Author deals here with the consequences of the 1967 Six Day War and of the 1973 Yom Kippur War on the construction (or strengthening) of the connection between the Shoah and the question of Israel’s defence and security. As Bensoussan states, it was in fact the fear of a new Shoah that preceded the 1967 war to transform ”the Shoah-Israel link into the relationship that we know today”. Here comes the most innovative part of the book and some of its most interesting issues. The Author challenges here the new generations; his attempt is to raise awareness
of the dangers of the obsessive repetition and misuse of the Shoah for future political decisions, whether in the realm of international relations (security, borders etc.) or in that of domestic social politics (education, schooling, teaching of history etc.). Bensoussan does not present material previously unknown; it is enough to consider the works of Yael Zerubavel, or the movie by Eyal Sivan Izkort! Les esclaves de la memoire, produced already in 1991. Nor is novel - although still very effective - the use of the famous quote by Menachem Begin, when, upon launching the Peace in Galilee operation in June 1982, he stated: “the alternative is Treblinka; and we have decided that there won’t be another Treblinka” (chapter 6, p. 171). The Author does not stop to this quote, but provides other examples of such a misuse of the Shoah in Israel and in the framework of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict: Moshe Feiglin, for example, the leader of Zo Artzeinu (the movement This is our land) defining Itzak Rabin as “the Judenrat that pushes us on trains”. And while some historiography (for one example Avraham Burg) has also pushed this argument further, underlining how verbal violence inevitably leads to political assassination, Bensoussan advocates against such a misuse the right to oblivion (chapter 6, p. 184), for example quoting the famous letter by Amos Oz published on Yediot Ahronot in June 1982 “Mr Begin, Adolf Hitler died 37 years ago. Whether you like it or not, this is a fact. Hitler is not hiding in Nabatye, nor in Sidon, nor in Beirut. He is really dead”. The last pages of this book deal with the over-exposition of Israelis to the memory of the Shoah, for example through the so called “marches of the living” – school trips of Israeli teen-agers to European former death camps – an experience which Bensoussan defines “an injection of paranoia”. And it is in fact by looking at these school trips that one can understand how Israel – and its new generations most of all – are closing up in fear rather than opening up to a broader conception of their past and of the Jewish past, where human suffering is free to emerge out of ethnic or religious boundaries to more universal traits. This idea is complemented by final words of the book, an invitation to emerge out of the depths, out of the fears and traumas of the Shoah, to return to what once had been the pulsating souls of Judaism, to Zionism as an attempt to “liberate the Jewish condition from the curse of the people dwelling alone” (p. 192). As Hugo Bergmann had written in the 1920s “There have always been two tendencies confronting each other in Judaism. On the one hand, the tendency to close up, characterized by hatred for the foreigner and by the Amalek complex; this is expressed through a continuous repetition of the words ‘Remember what they have done to you’. There exists however another Judaism (...) whose prayer can be summarised as follows: ‘Allow me to forget Amalek’. This is a Judaism of love and forgiveness.” (pp. 188-189). Despite the fact that, as mentioned above, this book does not present major historiographical novel interpretations, it represents an important and welcome contribution to the bookshelves, indeed because of its being able to summarize in less than two hundred pages a complex, controversial and difficult history of
the relation between Israel and its most recent and terrible past. Even more so in the Italian case, where little is known — in terms of historical analysis — of this difficult relationship, especially from the perspective of Israel itself. The Italian edition does not present a reference list while it provides a useful and well-done glossary of foreign terms, useful for the non-specialized reader.

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