

The Cauldron and the Covenant

Aryeh Leib Thorne Toren · 20 October 2026

Simon Sebag Montefiore's history of the modern Middle East, read through Torah and republican thought

By Aryeh Leib Thorne Toren

The history

Simon Sebag Montefiore's *The Cauldron: The Making of the Modern Middle East* (2026) does not open at Versailles or Sykes-Picot. It opens with Ibn Saud's dawn assault on Riyadh in 1902. The choice is the argument. Local rulers and peoples made this region as much as foreign mapmakers did, and a story told only through Western maps leaves out the people who actually acted.

He divides the era into four periods. First came Ottoman decline and European intervention, then the Mandates, then the Cold War years of pan-Arabism and oil. From 1979 came revolutionary Islamism. He treats the Iranian Revolution as a hinge on the scale of 1789 or 1917, and concludes, in the words quoted by the *Literary Review*, that “it was not so much Islam that was radicalised after 1979, but revolutionism that was Islamised.” Reviewers praise the narrative and note it is thinner on theory. That leaves room for the questions below.

The present moment

In a conversation with Bari Weiss for *The Free Press* on 9 October 2026, Montefiore called this “a moment of amazing potential.” In his account, the Abraham Accords did not collapse after 7 October 2023 or the wars with Iran. They are still working. On the *New Statesman's New Society* podcast, released 3 September 2026, he said he does not think there is a genocide in Gaza but “a brutal war,” citing intent. He criticised the Israeli government and voiced hope for two states. These are his views, reported as his.

Covenant and contract

Daniel Elazar distinguished a contract from a covenant. A contract lasts as long as it serves both sides. A covenant binds the parties beyond their immediate interest, because the word itself is held sacred. Most regional alignments have been contracts. The Gulf–Israel opening is driven by shared threat and trade. Whether it grows into something more binding depends on whether the words spoken are kept when they become costly.

The Torah's model of power is delegated, never absolute. Even Israel's king is limited (Devarim 17), and ultimate sovereignty belongs to G-d alone. That standard indicts external engineers who redraw a region from outside. It equally indicts revolutionary and theocratic regimes that claim total authority from within.

Non-domination

Philip Pettit's republicanism names the same danger in secular terms: the capacity for arbitrary interference. Foreign tutelage creates it, and so do Nasserist, Ba'athist and Khomeinist states. Montefiore observes that some limited monarchies have proved more durable than revolutionary republics. Limited power is not yet freedom, but it is a beginning.

The test

The covenantal reading neither celebrates every normalisation as redemption nor dismisses every alignment as bargaining. It asks three questions. Is power acknowledged as limited? Does speech bind? Can institutions pass on a shared moral identity to the next generation? Those questions are the measure for what is built next.

Sources

- Bari Weiss with Simon Sebag Montefiore, “How the New Middle East Was Made,” The Free Press, 9 October 2026
- New Society podcast (New Statesman), 3 September 2026
- Malise Ruthven, review of The Cauldron, Literary Review
- Simon Sebag Montefiore, The Cauldron (2026), author site
- Devarim 17 (Sefaria)
- Daniel J. Elazar, The Covenant Tradition in Politics (Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs)

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