



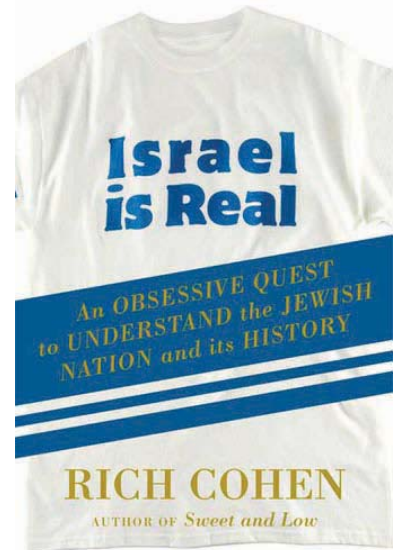
# Reading Group Gold

## Israel is Real

by Rich Cohen

### About this Guide

The questions and discussion topics that follow are designed to enhance your reading of Rich Cohen's *Israel Is Real*. We hope they will enrich your experience as you explore this fascinating history of the idea of Israel.



ISBN: 0-374-17778-3 | 400 pages

### Introduction

Hailed by critics as the definitive, monumental portrait of Israel, Rich Cohen's refreshing survey is unlike anything you have read about this provocative topic. Offering a comprehensive history—packed with little-known details and an eyeopening retelling of epic episodes—alongside polemic-free observations about the concept of Israel, Cohen invites us to set aside political arguments and simply explore Israel's realities as a place, a symbol, and ultimately an identity. *Israel Is Real* chronicles an extraordinary evolution, encompassing the destruction of the Second Temple in ad 70 (when a handful of visionaries saved Judaism by shifting the focus from Jerusalem to a holy city of the mind), medieval false prophets such as David Alroy (whom Cohen calls the first superhero, with his tallis as a cape), the rise of Zionism, and the modern-day paradox of Jewish power. Woven throughout is Cohen's conversational, often wry narrative voice, presenting the myths, the tragedies, the happy endings (real and imagined), and the battlegrounds (physical and ideological) in an informative tour that is sure to spark rich dialogues.

### Questions for Discussion

1. How did Rich Cohen change your perception of Israel? What historical facts surprised you as you read *Israel Is Real*? What conventional wisdoms does Cohen overturn?
2. Chapter one describes the first Jewish revolt against the Romans, raising the questions, "Accommodation or war? What if the Zealots had lost this argument? What if the Temple had survived? Would people still speak of 'the Jewish character'?" Speculate about Rich Cohen's "what ifs."
3. Discuss Jonathan ben Zakkai's school (which, according to lore, was built in a vineyard). What ideas did he preserve, despite the Diaspora? What image of Judaism was "harvested" as a result?
4. The book's title was inspired by a T-shirt Cohen's best friend was wearing when he returned from a trip to Tel Aviv in 1977 (described in chapter ten). Beyond political and geographical boundaries, what does the phrase "Israel Is Real" mean throughout the book, from mysticism to the rise of Jewish ghettos?
5. What role have sacred texts played in shaping the idea of Israel? What gives a book—or an inscribed scroll—such power?



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## Questions for Discussion

6. When Cohen describes the conversion of the self-proclaimed messiah Sabbatai Zevi to Islam in the seventeenth century, he captures an event that led to mass apostasy in Constantinople. What is the price of such assimilation? How was Jewish culture affected by the fact that other populations were not forced (or even encouraged) to convert to Judaism in order to survive?
7. Cohen concludes chapter five by stating that the failures of prophecy meant that “if return was ever to be accomplished . . . it would have to wait for secularism, in fact, for engineers and scientists, for Jews who could make their own miracles.” What does this mean for religious Jews? What does it even mean to be a religious Jew in the twenty-first century?
8. A footnote in chapter two presents the analogy of what would happen if America were destroyed and Americans felt compelled to perpetuate the idea of America while in exile. What would that exercise look like for you? What ideals does America stand for? What ideals does Israel stand for?
9. At the end of chapter six, Cohen turns to the story of Jonah to summarize Jewish history in Europe, from the Diaspora and the ghettos to the finality of Hitler’s camps. Discuss the paradox of Jews’ “feeding themselves to the beast” for survival, and returning to history for freedom.
10. What aspects of Jewish identity are represented in the Zionists described by Cohen, from Theodor Herzl to David Ben-Gurion and Moshe Dayan? How would Benjamin Disraeli have fared as Britain’s prime minister if he had served during the fall of the Ottoman Empire?
11. Cohen reiterates the fact that the Holocaust provided the ultimate justification for Israel. In what ways has Israel been, as Cohen puts it, the “happy ending” in a world of anti-Semitism?
12. How did the Six-Day War redefine what it means to support Israel? Is military might the best way to avoid being kept on the margins of society?
13. In contemporary conflicts between Palestinians and Israelis, do both sides have it wrong in any way? How could Cohen’s perception of history foster peace?
14. “No one hates a Jew like a Zionist,” Cohen writes in the last line of his chapter on the new Jew (chapter twelve). What is the impact of stereotypes of Jews, even among Jews (such as Europe’s elite, who funded repatriation of eastern Jews to Palestine to ensure their distance)?
15. How does the storytelling approach in *Israel Is Real* compare with that of other books you’ve read by Rich Cohen? What makes his approach to research (especially biographical research) unique?



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## Praise

“Cohen is a masterful and slyly provocative writer who marches boldly into the most controversial issues posed by the existence of Israel. Blending historical narrative with contemporary reportage, *Israel Is Real* makes an argument that cannot be ignored. Along the way, Cohen establishes himself as being among the most talented essayists of his generation.” —Evan Wright, author of *Generation Kill*

“A fascinating big-picture account of Israel from its distant past to what happened last week. Rich Cohen tells this story central to mankind with skill, passion, common sense, and wit.” —Ian Frazier, author of *Great Plains*

“The best book I’ve ever read about Israel (that troubled state), and the last word on it: all the stories, all the figures, all the fires, all the battles, all the exiles, all the personalities, all the strikes, and all the gutters. Rich Cohen has delivered the full big thing, a monumental book, the best I’ve read and expect to read for a long time. As the priests in the old city would say, it has hava: it’s full of life.” —David Lipsky, author of *Absolutely American: Four Years at West Point*

“Nobody has yet written about our Middle East heartbreak with such range and lucidity. Rich Cohen has kept an account of the wanderings; he’s kept a record of the tears. *Israel Is Real* is the definitive book on Israel.” —Darin Strauss, author of *Chang and Eng*

“Rich Cohen’s book creates a vibrant portrait that offers reasons Israel—surrounded by those who want to exterminate it—deserves to survive.” —Ron Rosenbaum, author of *Explaining Hitler*

## About the Author

Rich Cohen is the author of *Sweet and Low* (FSG, 2006), *Tough Jews*, *The Avengers*, *The Record Men*, and the memoir *Lake Effect*. His work has appeared in many major publications, and he is a contributing editor at *Rolling Stone*. He lives with his family in Connecticut.

Guide written by Amy Root / Amy Root’s Wordshop, Inc.