

Myth and Memoricide: On Shlomo Sand's 'The Invention of the Jewish People.'

Robin Yassin-Kassab

A nation is "a group of persons united by a common error about their ancestry and a common dislike of their neighbours." Karl Deutsch.

"I don't think books can change the world, but when the world begins to change, it searches for different books." Shlomo Sand.

Our Assumptions About Israel

Here is what we in the West, to a varying extent, whether we are religious or not, assume about the Jews and Israel:

The Jews of the world, white, black and brown, are the sons of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Moses, after leading the Jews out of Egyptian enslavement, gave them laws. Emerging from the desert, the Jews conquered the promised land of Canaan, which became Judea and Israel, later the mighty kingdom of David and Solomon. In 70CE the Romans destroyed the temple at Jerusalem and drove the Jews from their land. A surviving Jewish remnant was expelled when Muslim-Arab conquerors colonised the country in the 7th Century. And so the Jews wandered the earth, the very embodiment of homelessness. But throughout their long exile, against all odds, the Jews kept themselves a pure, unmixed race. Finally they returned, after the Holocaust, to Palestine, "a land without a people for a people without a land."

This story has been told again and again in our culture. Today we find bits of it in Mark Twain and Leon Uris, in Hollywood's output and in church pulpits, and of course in the mainstream news media. American Christian Zionists – devotees of the Schofield Bible – swear by it, and swear to support Israel with all the power of their voting block until the Risen Christ declares the apocalypse.

Mythistory

The idea of the Jews as a race was formed in the 19th Century in response to the ethnic-

nationalisms burgeoning throughout post-Napoleonic east and central Europe. As Russians, Poles and Germans claimed their respective sets of heroic precursors, stressing their Orthodox or Catholic heritage to the exclusion of the Jews, certain Jewish intellectuals set out to invent their own national mythology. They didn't do so cynically, but as prisoners of their moment. They did what they could in the ideological-scientific atmosphere they inhabited, and their endeavour became more urgent as antisemitism became a defining feature of neighbouring nationalisms.

Scripture was a key tool. Traditionally, the Old Testament or Torah had been far less important to Jews than it was to the protestant Christians who read it as esoteric prophecy. If Jews read the Torah they considered the 'oral Torah' – the Mishnah and Talmud – necessary for the Torah's interpretation. The daily religious practice of observant Jews was based on the Halakha law. But Jewish-nationalist intellectuals resurrected the Torah as a guide to secular history. The Bible, these modern thinkers reasoned, may not tell us the origin of man or the universe, but it does tell us the origin of the Jewish people. And knowing the origin of the Jewish people must give us understanding of the Jews today, for in any people's origin is its essence. "Right from the start," Shlomo Sand writes, "there was a close connection between the perception of the Old Testament as a reliable historical source and the attempt to define modern Jewish identity in nationalist terms."

Jewish nationalism was working in the context of the maximal European imperial expansion which had given rise to orientalism, social Darwinism and the enormously influential



pseudo-science of racial theory. Embarrassing memories of ghetto culture were ignored and the true riches of the Jews eclipsed by a false epic. Now *“Judaism would no longer be a rich and diverse religious civilisation that managed to survive despite all difficulties and temptations in the shadow of giants, and became an ancient people or race that was uprooted from its homeland in Canaan and arrived in its youth at the gates of Berlin.”*

It was a short step from here to Zionism, the idea that the Jews must ‘return’ to their ancient home, as blood returns to soil, and find secular redemption there through the establishment of a state. Zionism was *“an ethnocentric nationalist movement that firmly enclosed the historical people of its own invention.”*

In the context of fierce antisemitism both under the Czars and in the western countries, the rise of Zionist thought is understandable. If Ashkenazi Jews had fought for a chunk of eastern Europe, perhaps their cause would have been laudable. Zionism’s fatal flaw was its territorial association with Palestine, and the European colonial element which underpinned this. Palestine was an Islamic land in which only 4% of the population was Jewish. Muslim nationalism in India may well have been a mistake, but at least the idea was to establish a state in areas which already had an Indian Muslim majority. The Pakistan movement didn’t aim to colonise Mecca.

But European Zionists were headed for Asia. Their colonial mindset led them to assume that the Palestinian natives would be painlessly displaced, or perhaps would remain as “hewers of wood” who would never seek political rights. In any case, the natives were of no more consequence than the subject races in British Africa. Zionism’s first ideologue Theodore Herzl clarified the link between classic imperialism and the Zionist project in a letter to Cecil Rhodes: *“You are being invited to help make history . . . it does not involve Africa but a piece of Asia Minor, not Englishmen, but Jews . . . How then do I happen to turn to you since this is an out-of-the-way matter for you? How indeed? Because it is something colonial.”*

It is this attitude that has doomed the Levant to perpetual war.

At first very few European Jews fell for it. According to Sand, *“in Germany in 1914 Zionists accounted for less than 2% of Germans of Jewish origin, and in France even less.”* Most western

European Jews considered themselves citizens of their respective states first and Jews second, if at all. Most eastern European Jews were orthodox believers who disdained Zionism as a heresy. For them, Israel was a spiritual condition to be initiated by the Messiah, and it was blasphemy to seek to hurry it up. The most popular political movement among Jews east and west was radical socialism.

The closing of America’s gates to Jewish immigrants in the 1920s, and then the rise of Nazism, which shared the belief in Jewish racial distinction, propelled Zionism into the mainstream. In 1917, with the Balfour Declaration coinciding with the collapse of the Ottoman state, the movement won the British empire’s sponsorship.

Most of the Jews in Europe’s displaced persons’ camps at the end of the Second World War wanted to migrate to America. But, under pressure from a young Israel lobby, America’s gates, even in triumph, remained firmly shut. Jews poured into Palestine instead, and in 1948 celebrated the independence of the State of Israel. For Palestinians it was the ‘Nakba’, or ‘Catastrophe’. Over 800,000 were driven from the land claimed by the Jewish state. More were expelled when Israel conquered Jerusalem, the West Bank and Gaza in 1967. Today more than half of Palestinians live outside Palestine, most in refugee camps. Those who remain on their land experience military occupation and varying degrees of apartheid.

As the Jewish state encountered native resistance it found it necessary to import Jews of Moroccan, Yemeni, and Iraqi origin to build its demographic weight, and to teach the ethnic-national myth to them. So it is that a blue-eyed Slav and a black Ethiopian can fight shoulder to shoulder in the Israeli Defence Force cradled by belief in their common racial origin.

Dismantling the Myths

It couldn’t last for long. As historical methodology developed, particularly with its new pragmatic focus on archeological research, the Biblical-racial version of Jewish history began to collapse. Biblical archeology in Israel – and despite international legal prohibition of excavation in occupied territory, in the West Bank too after 1967 – was always *“an enlisted instrument of the nationalist ideology,”* but one which rebounded nevertheless.

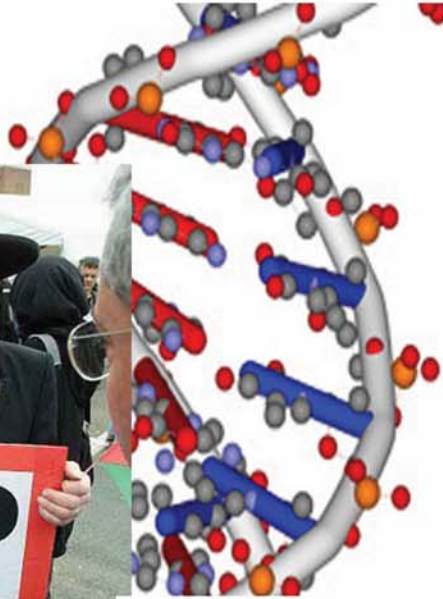


Israel doesn't need your sympathy...

I S R A E L



NEEDS YOU!



Les qualités du Juif d'après la méthode de Gall
Qualities of the Jew after the method of Gall (the inventor of phrenology)
Front cover of the illustrated magazine La Libre Parole - Free Word, France for the French December 1893



It now appears that the Torah was written as recently as the sixth or fifth century BCE. Rather than a record left by the ancient patriarchs, it was the product of the “*self-isolating literary politics*” of Jewish elites who had come into contact with abstract Persian religious ideas. These literateurs made use of exaggerated administrative records from the past as well as myths and parables common to the region. Their Torah wasn’t intended to generate a sense of belonging to the nation among the peasant majority – most of whom were pagans – as it would be in a modern context, because neither the Judeans nor anyone else at the time entertained the concept of mass national belonging. On the contrary, the Torah was part of an exercise in isolating the bearers of high culture from the rabble. It identified the noble strain among the people.

The elite claimed a prestigious Mesopotamian ancestry, locating themselves as foreigners from the highest and oldest of cultures, Ur of the Chaldees. Iraq was the supposed home of the great ancestor Abraham.

After Mesopotamia, the second centre of Middle Eastern civilisation was Egypt, and Moses’s Egyptian associations retrospectively added to the civilisational prestige of the Jews. But the nation-shaping flight from Egypt seems to have never happened. In the 13th Century BCE, the supposed period of the exodus, Egypt ruled Canaan. How then could the Children of Israel have escaped from Egyptian rule into Egyptian rule? In all the many surviving Pharaonic records there is no mention of the Children of Israel passing through, nor of the various plagues visited on the Egyptians. Karen Armstrong’s book “The Great Transformation” suggests that the actual exodus may have been of believers from the coastal cities of Palestine, under total Egyptian control and so known as ‘Egypt’, to the hills of the West Bank, and shows that the language used in the Book of Exodus to describe the parting of the Red Sea is suspiciously similar to a Canaanite text which describes a ritual crossing of the River Jordan.

Likewise, archeology has found no trace of the genocidal conquest of Canaan described in the Book of Joshua. Jericho, according to the Biblical account a mighty walled city before its destruction, was a small unwallled town at the time. And none of Solomon’s many fabled palaces have been unearthed. The consensus is that the glorious united national kingdom of

David and Solomon, the state that Zionism sought to reconstitute, never existed.

The Converts

The story of the exile of 70AD was also dramatically exaggerated. The Roman Empire did not expel entire populations. It had neither the ability nor the motivation to do so. Rome destroyed the Jewish political class when it destroyed the temple, but the mass of the Judean population remained on their farms. By this time anyway there were already more followers of Judaism outside Judea than within. The signification of ‘Jew’ was no longer ‘inhabitant of Judea’ but ‘a believer in the Judean religion,’ and the Jews had become “a heterogenous mosaic of human populations that lived in the Hasmonean kingdom, in the Persian domain and in the far flung expanses of the Roman empire.”

How did Judaism spread? Judea and Israel were peasant societies, not traders like the Phoenicians and Greeks who established port-colonies around the Mediterranean. Certainly a few Jews travelled to do business, but the demographic change was made by preachers, for Judaism at this stage was a converting religion.

Sometimes it engaged in forced conversion, as was the case with the inhabitants of conquered Edom in 125 BCE. More usually, and most especially in the two centuries before Christ, it spread by peaceful proselytisation. Monotheism’s universalising tendencies answered well the demands of decaying late-Hellenism. Centres of converted Jews bloomed in Damascus and Alexandria and all around the east Mediterranean. Aggressive proselytising in Rome – where the religion was particularly popular among women – irritated the conservative pagan classes as much as Christianity would later, leading to several expulsions of Jews from the city. But Judaism continued to grow, unwittingly preparing the way for Christianity, a Jewish heresy which preached an even more universalist message and gave up the demand for converts to be circumcised.

By the 4th Century Christianity had taken over and Jewish numbers began slowly to decline. When Christianity became Rome’s (or Byzantium’s) state religion, Jews were repressed as Christ-killers and stubborn rejectionists of the true faith. Christianity and



later antisemitism developed the myth of Jewish exile as divine punishment. According to the tale, the converts were not native Europeans but homeless Judeans cursed to wander in foreign lands. Jewish theology internalised this in response.

But conversion still continued beyond the Christianised Roman lands. The Yemeni kingdom of Himyar converted to Judaism in the 4th Century CE, shortly after its Ethiopian rival had converted to Christianity. Yemen's brand of the religion was known as 'Rahman Judaism', 'Rahman' being a Hebrew-Arabic word for God the Merciful, after 'Allah' the name of God most commonly used by the first Muslims. In the Maghreb and Spain, Berbers, Arabs and Iberians converted.

The most remarkable of the Jewish communities arose from the Khazar Kingdom of the 4th to 13th centuries CE. Originally a coalition of shamanistic Turkic clans, the Khazars mixed with their Slav, Magyar and Bulgar subjects, and with immigrant Armenian and Iraqi Jews, and adopted Judaism in the 8th or 9th century. Thereafter the kingdom became a pluralist polity similar to Muslim al-Andalus, but one with a Jewish aristocracy and perhaps a Jewish majority. The same Mongol invasion which sacked Baghdad destroyed Khazar power and, more decisively, the irrigation systems on which the country relied. In the ensuing depopulation, Khazar Jews fled west towards Poland and Lithuania.

Later the encounter of these Jews with German eastward colonisation resulted in the Yiddish language, a mix of Germanic, Slavic and Turkic dialects. By the end of the 19th Century, 80% of the world's Jews were Yiddish speakers.

Arthur Koestler wrote about the Yiddish Jews' Khazar origins in his book "The Thirteenth Tribe." "*Their ancestors,*" he said, "*came not from the Jordan but from the Volga, not from Canaan but from the Caucasus . . . genetically they are more closely related to the Hun, Uigur and Magyar tribes than to the seed of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.*"

Clearly this history does not fit with 'Palestinian' Jewish nationalism. If memory of the conversions had survived, the imagined narrative of a unified ethnos bent on 'return' would never have been born. But this memory was killed as surely as the memory of the hundreds of dynamited Palestinian villages after

1948. Research into the Khazars, after a brief flourish, was silenced by Zionism in Israel and by Stalinist national chauvinism in Russia. And, in an earlier age, the converts themselves would have been eager to claim a noble Judean ancestry. In the same way we find an inordinate number of Indian Muslims with the family name Quraishi, to emphasise a pure Arabian tribal origin rather than an idolotrous Hindu past.

Zionism panicked when it was confronted by Khazar history. Israel's ambassador to the UK hysterically labelled Koestler's book "*an antisemitic action financed by the Palestinians.*" Koestler was himself a Jew, and a soft Zionist, but it was no good. Even remembering was cast as an act of terror.

Shlomo Sand laments the memoricide of the Khazar-Yiddish Jews:

"When we consider the tremendous effort that the memory agents in Israel have invested in commemorating their dying moments, compared with the scanty effort made to discover the rich (or wretched, depending on one's viewpoint) life lived in Yiddishland before the vicious massacre, we can draw only sad conclusions about the political and ideological role of modern historiography."

The Judeans

But what of Judaism's Judean originators? What had happened to them in the meanwhile?

By the arrival of Islam, Judea – named Palestine by the Romans – still contained a core of Jewish believers. Many had converted to Christianity, however. There was also a Samaritan minority, and the bulk of the peasantry remained pagan, as it had always been.

Palestine had experienced constant ongoing immigration of and intermarriage with southern desert tribes since the earliest times, and the Muslim conquest didn't dramatically alter Judean demographics. The Arabs did not settle the land in numbers, and the Jews welcomed these conquerors who respected them as 'people of the Book', a significant improvement on Byzantine state persecution. One contemporary Jew wrote, "*God it was who inspired the Ishmaelite kingdom to aid us,*" and reported that Jews had joined the Muslim army to fight the Byzantine forces. Under Islamic rule Jews were permitted to enter Jerusalem, which had been forbidden to them formerly.





So where did the Jews go? *“It is reasonable to assume,”* Sand writes, *“that a slow, moderate process of conversion took place in Palestine/ Land of Israel, and accounted for the disappearance of the Jewish majority in the country.”*

In other words (and with reservations – no human group remains ‘pure’ over hundreds of years) with an admixture of southern Arab, Greek, Persian, Egyptian, and Frankish blood, today’s Palestinians are of Judean ‘stock’. This means the population closest ethnically to the ancient Israelites are the Palestinians. The same Palestinians the Jewish state expelled en masse in 1947 and 48, and again in 1967.

For a fleeting moment in the Zionist enterprise the Judean origin of the natives was openly discussed. Some Zionists even argued for a unified homeland based on ethnic brotherhood with the Palestinians, but the 1929 Arab Uprising dashed their unrealistic hopes and the Judeans were forgotten again. *“The inclusive concept,”* Sand writes, *“was based on the assumption that it would be easy to assimilate a ‘low and primitive’ Oriental culture, and so the first violent resistance from the objects of this Orientalist fantasy shook them awake.”*

Responses

Shlomo Sand’s excellent book shows how depressingly easily hard science will soften and flow into channels shaped by the political mood of the scientists; how what we think is knowledge is determined by what we are prepared to know. This is a lesson for all of us.

Beyond that, the book poses an obvious challenge to all three Abrahamic faiths. A simplistic ‘new atheist’ of the Richard Dawkins school would go so far as to argue that the modern Bible science on display here discredits the monotheisms in general. In fact it challenges only those modernist tendencies in the montheisms which are the result of their infection by scientific discourse, their new belief that only what is scientifically validated is ‘true’. This is the same thought pattern that declares the fictional characters of Shakespeare and Tolstoy to be ‘lies’ because they are not empirically real. Traditional religion, on the other hand, wasn’t concerned with telling stories which were true in a literal sense, but with stories whose value was symbolic and spiritual. The story of liberation told in the flight-from-Egypt tale, retold at various times by Muslims, Boers, European settlers in America,

and Rastafarians, does not lose its value because the Red Sea might in fact have been the River Jordan. Certainly traditional Judaism understood this. The sages said that the Torah has seventy faces, meaning seventy symbolic interpretations.

What Sand’s book tests is religious literalism, the misguided attempt by contemporary Christians and Muslims as well as Jews to read their scripture as historical or scientific fact rather than as a complex of myths whose origins we can not be sure of but which have been reworked (reworked by God, an orthodox Muslim would say) to teach spiritual messages. Stories about Noah, Abraham and Moses were widespread in ancient Middle Eastern cultures. The fact that in certain written narratives the stories were given imaginary detail, and for political reasons, does not eliminate the possibility that these prophets actually existed. In the absence of evidence, it remains a question of belief. In any case, the message of the prophets is real and comprehensible, to be accepted or rejected according to conscience and reason.

If “The Invention of the Jewish People” has profound ramifications for religion, its challenge to ethnic-nationalism is still greater. It is first a reminder – and it does seem we need one – that race is not a valid scientific concept. Then it warns against any nationalism which seeks to harness a crumbling religion. Zionism is not the only movement to have fallen into the trap. In the Arab world, Baathism transformed the Arab peoples into an eternal message-bearing force. Imperial America sees itself as a new Jerusalem processing the world’s manifest destiny. Very often, nationalism itself is a religion.

But the prime target of Sand’s book is of course Zionism, hence the combative tone of many of the reviews. Despite choosing “The Invention of the Jewish People” as his book of the year, Simon Schama attacked Sand in the Financial Times for being “self-dramatising” and for repeating old research – although Sand tells us in his introduction that he will bring nothing new. Schama’s review creates targets to tilt at while ignoring Sand’s central arguments. Schama fears the only alternative to ethnic-nationalism would be “arbitrary cultural oblivion” for the Jews (he never distinguishes between Jews and Israelis). And the case for the Jewish state, he says, is *“the case made by a community of suffering, not just during the Holocaust but over centuries of expulsions and persecutions.”*



Unlike Sand, Schama never mentions the Palestinians. He remembers the Holocaust but forgets the Nakba. In his mind, Jewish cultural expression takes precedence over the rights of the expelled natives who await a real, not mythical, return. For him, the Palestinians are still invisible. If he could see them he wouldn't be able to believe that their dispossession could be a remedy for suffering. For how can an atrocity be a remedy for an atrocity?

Sand's Remedy

Jabotinski, the father of the Israeli right, wrote, "It is physically impossible for a Jew descended from several generations of pure, unmixed Jewish blood to adopt the mental state of a German or a Frenchman, just as it is impossible for a Negro to cease to be a Negro."

As Sand points out, in a state which forbids marriage between a 'Jew' and a 'non-Jew', this sort of thing is not the stuff of mere comedy. Israel is "a state whose main purpose is to serve not a civil-egalitarian demos but a biological-religious ethnos that is wholly fictitious historically, but dynamic, exclusive and discriminatory in its political manifestation." A quarter of the population of 'Israel proper' consists of non-Jewish Palestinians and Russians who hold Israeli 'citizenship' but not nationality. Palestinian Israelis are discriminated against socially, educationally and economically, which leads Sand to fear a 'Kosovo in Galilee'. The Palestinian inhabitants of annexed Jerusalem, meanwhile, have neither nationality nor citizenship, but residence permits which are frequently revoked. Israel hasn't formally annexed the West Bank because there are too many Palestinians there. Instead it hopes to keep the land while containing the Palestinians in enclosed urban zones. If the natives behave they'll have low-level autonomy and the questionable right to fight against their own resistance forces. If they misbehave they'll join the grand prison experiment in Gaza.

And Jews are victims too. Just as Zionism suppresses Palestinian national expression, so it denies the very existence of a specifically 'Israeli' nationality. Nationality for Zionism is Jewish, full stop. But what of the young people in Tel Aviv who are not believers, who find they have nothing in common with the Jews of New York or Moscow, who are Israeli because they were born in Palestine and grew up eating falafel? Zionism refuses to see them.

For Sand the ideal remedy would be a democratic binational state between the Mediterranean and the River Jordan. Failing this, he counsels Israeli withdrawal from the territories occupied in 1967 and, within Israel, "a policy of democratic multiculturalism . . . that grants the Palestino-Israelis not only complete equality but also a genuine and firm autonomy."

He also acknowledges his pessimism. The United States continues to fund and arm Israel even as Israel's rampages accelerate. In the absence of outside pressure, only a tiny minority of Israeli Jews are prepared to move their country into a post-Zionist phase. To go from this sorry state to the creation of the future desired by Sand will require an act of imagination no less bold than that which transformed the Jewish past. "If the nation's history was mainly a dream, he finishes, "why not begin to dream its future afresh, before it becomes a nightmare?"

