

The following articles are review/essays of Shlomo Sand's book *The Invention of the Jewish People* (translated from the Hebrew by Yael Lotan, Verso, 2009, 322 pages).

A Cat Among the Pigeons

Reviewed by Michael Luftmensch

Like a cat among the pigeons, Shlomo Sand's critique of Jewish history has created a commotion; blood and feathers fill the air. A bestseller when it was published in Israel, *The Invention of the Jewish People* debunks Zionist historiography and deflates Israel's national mythology. There are a lot of rotten apples hanging on the Zionist tree, and Sand gives the trunk a good shake. In just over three hundred pages, a bountiful harvest of myths masquerading as history are put through the ringer of scrutiny and reduced to pulp.

There is nothing new here, nothing that can't be found elsewhere. What is novel, however, is Sand's counter-narrative. It's written against the Standard Israeli version of Jewish history, with a sensibility that might best be described as republican. Sand's championship of the principles of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity harks back to the heyday of the Third Republic, when French democrats exploded national and clerical myths with little regard for the sensibilities of the Old Order. That these basic egalitarian principles are deemed radical in Israel at the beginning of the 21st century is the root of the scandal around the book.

Consider: for secular Israelis who have seen through the miasma of Zionism, Jewishness is always bad faith. Its appeal is always aimed at the most base elements of the national psyche. As for Judaism—it's just so much dead weight, ludicrous and coercive and hypocritical. Contra the North American experience, where you can call yourself what you will—a secular Jew or a Jew for Jesus—Jewishness in Israel is an existential identity. Totalizing and discriminatory, it marks the basic line of demarcation for all things Israeli. And since it's the difference that determines fate, it isn't in the least a matter of personal choice. That makes Jewishness something secular Israelis are force-fed. It's a regimen that provokes resistance—which is where Sand and his readership come in. They are fed up with state-sanctioned Jewishness, and are looking to slough it off.



Shlomo Sand

A Tel Aviv University professor, albeit of Modern European and not Jewish history, Sand uses his academic authority to sanction many a long-standing critique of Israel's Jewish mythology. Intent on inculcating Jewishness as a basic and altogether unique state of historical being, Israeli schools, from grade school and up into academia, treat Jewish history as a discipline apart—not to be confused with “General History.” In an educational system designed to instill the distinction between Jew and Other as fundamental, existential, and everlasting, Jewish history has played no small part in the indoctrination of generations of secular pupils.

By the time they've been through the mill, Israeli Jewish students know that the Jewish people date back to Moses, who led the Hebrews out of Egypt, inscribed the Ten Commandments in Sinai, and pointed the tribes in the direction of the Land of Israel. Further, they know they are the descendents of the ancient Israelites, who built the magnificent kingdoms of David and Solomon, and were twice exiled from their native land—after the fall of the First Temple in the sixth century BCE and again after the fall of the Second Temple in 70 CE—to finally return to the Land of Israel after two thousand years of persecution in the diaspora.

Now this history resonates perfectly with popular consciousness, but it's a narrative that does not have much historical verisimilitude. Professional historians know this, but refrain from speaking about it to the Israeli public for fear of being controversial (though that has not prevented them from castigating Sand for “beating on doors that have long been open”). Writing for the general public left in the Zionist dark, Sand traces the invention of the Jewish people to mid-19th century Jewish historians of proto-Zionist vintage, such as Graetz and Dubnov. Under the spell of the rising tide of European nationalism, they chose to see the Jews as a people and located their roots in the mist of antiquity, uncritically accepting the historical veracity of biblical narratives.

Theirs was a Jewish secular reading of the Bible, dispensing with the supernatural to focus on the historical dimension of the text. It was a viewpoint enthusiastically adopted by the early Zionists, who turned the secular study of the Hebrew Bible into a mandatory subject for Israeli schoolchildren. Mythology and literature turned into history, which in turn

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was buttressed by archeology, as Israeli archeologists crashed through the remains of earlier civilizations in pursuit of elusive finds to corroborate the Jewish historical record of David and Solomon's kingdom. When at the end of the 20th century, a new archeological paradigm pushed them into researching such mundane areas of existence as labour, diet and disposal of the dead, they were compelled to abandon an entire mindset.

The past was changing, but it wasn't until the nineties that Israelis got wind of it. The Patriarchs, the Egyptian Exodus, and the dynastic kingdom established by David, all fell by the wayside. The facts didn't add up, and the ideological incentive to force them to do so was gone. Mental inertia borne of a vested interest in the status quo keeps people from questioning established truths, but it doesn't stop those truths from becoming assailable. Meanwhile, the national passion for archeology waned.

The Exile That Didn't Take Place

For the past century, the link between the Jewish people and the Land of Israel has been described in organic terms. Supposedly, it was only severed by imperial violence. But ancient history does not substantiate the claim of a Jewish people driven into exile by the Romans in 70 CE. Indeed, all the evidence points to the contrary (not least of which are the Bar Kokhba revolt in 132–136 CE and the writing of the Palestinian Talmud).

The further Sand pushed in seeking historical clarification of the exile or forced dispersion of the Jewish inhabitants of Land of Israel, the clearer it became to him that this event had not taken place. Banishing the elite to the capital so that its members could be physically in thrall to a conquering sovereign was

common practice in the ancient world, but the expulsion of the provincial peasantry (to where?) seems to have been pretty much unheard of.

Christian explanations of the Jewish presence outside the Holy Land implanted the idea of a Jewish people exiled from their homeland as divine punishment. There was no evidence that an expulsion took place, and the guardians of Jewish history, who knew it very well, refrained from saying anything that could be construed as critical of official state ideology. After all, the Israeli Declaration of Independence states: "After being forcibly exiled from their land, the people kept faith with it throughout their Dispersion and never ceased to pray and hope for their return to it and for the restoration in it of their political freedom."

In actual fact, by the first century CE—the time of the forcible exile that did not take place—the majority of Jews in the world resided **outside** the Land of Israel. The largest concentration seems to have been in Persia (from where Jews spread out across Eurasia) but they also lived throughout the Mediterranean world, most famously in Alexandria and Rome.

The spread of Judaism, however, did not rely solely on the migrations of diaspora Jewry, for at the time Judaism was a proselytizing religion, actively engaged in winning converts far and wide. Indeed, it was the diffusion of Judaism into the Roman Empire that provided the early Christians with their first stepping stone for spreading their gospel outside of Palestine.

This well-known fact was conveniently forgotten by Israel's Jewish historians, lest it undermine the ideology of a shared ethnic heritage that supposedly underpins the Jewish people's attachment to the Land of Israel. Free of those compunctions, Sand's chapters on the first centuries of the first millennium CE are easily the most exciting in the book. This was the era of diffusion, when Judaism spread throughout the ancient world, claiming new adherents in far-flung lands, from Arabia to North Africa, and along the routes that led between Baghdad and Chang'an in China.

Just So!

Yet it is here, in his narrative of Judaism's diffusion, that Sand goes off track, piling up speculations about the centrality of Khazaria to the history of East European Jewry. A Jewish kingdom on the steppes, once de-contextualized from Eurasian history, becomes a short circuit that turns Khazaria into the

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wellspring of Yiddishland—Sand’s designation for the concentration of Yiddish-speaking Jews in Eastern Europe in the modern age.

It’s a kind of “just so story” whereby the complexities of migration and population are reduced to a few piquant strands of narrative.

The story of Khazarian origins can be pulled and pushed in any direction, and the Jewish option is only one among several. While it is incontestable that in the 8th century the Khazarian elite adopted Judaism to neutralize the claims of its Christian and Muslim neighbours, Sand has extrapolated a mass conversion of the king’s subjects—that ran so deep they would never shake it off!—something which ran against the pluralist customs of that time and place, not to mention the fact that evidence of Judaic practice in Khazaria is particularly underwhelming.

Lifted out of its context of the trade politics between China, Persia, and Byzantium, the Khazars take on a mythical quality: founders of a Kingdom of the Jews, the wellspring of East European Jewry in the misty reaches of early medieval time. (Didn’t Sand just warn us against this sort of thing?)

Historical just so stories short-circuit the multiplicity of factors that feed into any historical event in favour of one single determining factor. Rather than a knotted mess of a thousand and one strands, you have a single red thread. But on closer inspection, even red threads come apart.

During the second half of the first millennium, the Radhanites, a Jewish mercantile guild whose trade links extended from the south of France to China, vied for control of the northern land route (of the “Silk Road”) linking the Middle East to China. Being Jewish, they could move between Islamic polities and Christian kingdoms with relative liberty. And as east-west Eurasian trade increased, so did the resources at their disposal.

The mid-8th century rise of the Abbasid Caliphate and the concomitant implosion of Tang China (in the An Lushan Rebellion) led to new opportunities on the steppes linking these two kingdoms. It was in this interstice that the Radhanites converted the Khazars, who had taken control over a broad swath of the Eurasian steppes, from the Black Sea and the Caspian.

The existence of a philo-Judaic court in Khazaria

lasting a century and a half is evidence of the diffusion of Judaism across Eurasia, not the source of it. When Tang China finally collapsed in the 10th century, the “Silk Road” had been in decline for over a hundred years, reducing the Khazars’ major source of income, their tariffs on goods transported through their domain. Weakened by the Pechenegs and defeated by the Rus, the Khazars, along with many other Turkic

clans, were swept into the vortex of the Mongol explosion a couple of centuries later, never to re-emerge. The notion that the descendants of the Khazars or other Jewish communities along the Eurasian trade routes later migrated to Eastern Europe is no more than speculation. But Sand bends the speculative stick very far to link the Jewish population of Eastern Europe to the Khazars for reasons that appear to have more to do with romance than reality.

It seems unfortunate that Sand’s admirers have seized on Sand’s Khazar narrative, the weakest thread in his argument, as being of special significance. Nonetheless, the underlying premise—the heterogeneity of the Jewish peoples—is not unduly affected by his Khazarian misconceptions. For Sand’s Israeli readers, this book explains the simple facts that stare them in the face every day: Jews do not constitute one people, but are made up of a variety of distinct and apparently unrelated ethnic groups.

Popular wisdom has it that appearances are superficial and the same Jewish blood runs through their veins. So it is that Sand devotes the final chapter of his book to following the turns and twists of the search for the “Jewish gene.” To substantiate deeply held Jewish prejudices, Jewish geneticists turned to sociobiology. Like so many other sociobiology projects, this search has delivered inconclusive results that have been misinterpreted to reconfirm traditional assumptions.

The Israeli Republic of Dreams

The idea that an Israeli civil society can emerge out of the Zionist warfare state has always been a fervid hope of Israeli liberals. Yet while Israeli society has become more open and pluralistic, it has concomitantly become more chauvinistic and religious. Politically, the drift to the right within the Zionist movement



Collage by Michael Luftmensch

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but we hesitated, as we were still very skeptical. She knocked twice on the main door with no response. She switched to another door. Our hearts sank when the door slowly opened. We came through the gate to get a closer look. My mother engaged in a conversation with an old man, dressed in dirty clothes, most of his teeth missing. She certainly seemed to recognize him. She asked him if he remembered the house that used to be on the other side of the street. "Do you mean the house that belonged to Srulke [her father's name]? And he had there a store... and he had a daughter..." "That's me, Klara!" The old man couldn't believe it; he was shaken. He was ready to hug her, but my mother kept a distance from him. "What happened to the house?" "The Germans destroyed it."

My mother asked the man about the neighbors and about his family, using their names. Most of the children had moved to big cities in Ukraine and Russia. My mother recalled (in Hebrew) that once, when she was being hidden by a Catholic woman during the war, a Catholic holiday was approaching and she felt the need to contribute something to the menu. She came

at night to this very house and stole a chicken and brought it to the woman, who happily cooked it.

We walked further up the street. An old woman came out and asked my mother in a very suspicious tone: "What do you want? What are you looking for?" My mother asked her if she remembered the store on the other side of the street. "Yes, I remember." "They had a small girl—KLARA." I jumped forward, pointing toward my mother and said (in English), "This is Klara!" The old lady responded (my mother translated): "I remember Klara. You don't look like Klara!" My mother rolled her eyes and said, "Maybe there was another Klara..." The old lady continued: "There was a store. They were selling clothes, strings." My mother confirmed: "Yes, that was my father's store."

We were joined by another old lady with a big, white apron. She also remembered the store and remembered Klara. She stood there in awe, examining my mother and us from top to bottom, but unable to speak further. The old man rejoined us and said, "Where have you been all these years? Where did you come from?" "From Stanislavow..." my mother replied, and added, in Hebrew, that she was afraid to tell them that she came from Israel. "Who knows how they would react!" But then, gaining

courage, she turned to them: "Do you know where Israel is?" They nodded hesitantly. "That's where I came from!"

My mother also wanted to see the house where she lived during the war with her father and brother (and many other Jews, all doing forced labour). On the way, she indicated that some village roads still frightened her. She pointed to a house and we stopped. She went through the gate and knocked on the door. A young man came from the other side of the street and asked what she was looking for. "Did the Heller family live here before the war?" "I don't know. We inherited the house. My grandma would know, she lives in Kiev; Let me call her." He returned a few minutes later, quoting his grandmother: "The house was once owned by Hershko Heller." My mother did not feel comfortable telling him that it was here that she saw her father and brother for the last time before escaping from the Nazis.

We rejoined the group in Buchach and continued the trip back to Poland, to Zakopane (including the school where Lena Kichler housed 100 Jewish orphans after the war and later moved with them to Israel), and to the impressive Wieliczka Salt Mines before returning home. ♦

IMAGES FOR A CHANGING WORLD



THE CAT...

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never seems to have abated. The great fear that recognition of the basic principles of liberal democracy is tantamount to courting genocide, continues to hold Israeli Jews in thrall.

Entering the second decade of the 21st century, the Zionist ideology of Jewish return to Israel has been deflated by the recent experience of post-Soviet immigration. But the Zionist practice of dividing the population under Israeli rule into two distinct groups, to the benefit of the Jews and the detriment of everyone else, remains intact. Although it has become a source of friction with the immigrants, their frustrations with Israel's apparatus of institutional

discrimination have not led them to make common cause with the disenfranchised Arab citizens of the state, but to a reactive form of anticlericalism that draws primarily on popular *resentiment* against the draft exemption granted to Israel's ultra-Orthodox population.

All this makes the egalitarian and democratic reform of Israeli identity politics that Sand proposes appear fantastic and utopian in contemporary Israel, and Sand readily admits as much in his conclusion. But in keeping with his republican allegiances to Liberty, Equality and Fraternity, even in the depths of these bleak times, he retains the right to dream of a different future, one at variance with the suicidal realities the Israeli political class has laboured so zealously to foster. ♦