

Inventing Jewish Identity

By Jeff Zolitor

What exactly are the Jews—a nation, a people, a tribe, a society, a culture, or the remnant of a political state long ago exiled to foreign lands? What **is** Jewish identity? Does Israel as a Jewish homeland have the right to exist? Shlomo Sand, in his provocative book, *The Invention of the Jewish People*, attempts to answer these questions.

Sand, a professor of history, specifically, the history of nationalism, French intellectual history, and film as history, approaches his subject as a scholar, but readers should be forewarned that the book is sometimes excessive with anecdote and source material. In the “Introduction: Burdens of Memory,” he traces the ambiguity of Jewish identity by recounting an abundance of superfluous personal stories of various people he has met. In other places, his book is dense with source material, as when tracing the history of modern Jewish identity and ethnicity from its philosophical beginning with Jewish intellectuals in 19th century Germany. And despite Sand’s scholarship, I question some of his assertions about history. In a discussion on the formation of linguistic groups in Europe, for example, he writes, “In 15th century Western Europe, with the rise of the city and the beginning of more advanced forms of transportation and communication, firmer boundaries began to appear between broad linguistic groups, and the term ‘people’ began to be applied mainly to these.” Communication and transportation in 15th century Europe were much as they had been for millennia—even paved roads were long known in history—and the evolution of dialect to language was a segregating phenomenon long before the 15th century. On the whole, however, Sand’s desire to overwhelm the reader with reference and perspective can be excused due to the challenging nature of his subject and the essential questions he pours out at the feet of every member of the Jewish community.

It’s hard to pick out the heroes and villains in Sand’s work. In his chapter “Mythhistory,” he writes about the formation of the modern idea of Jewish

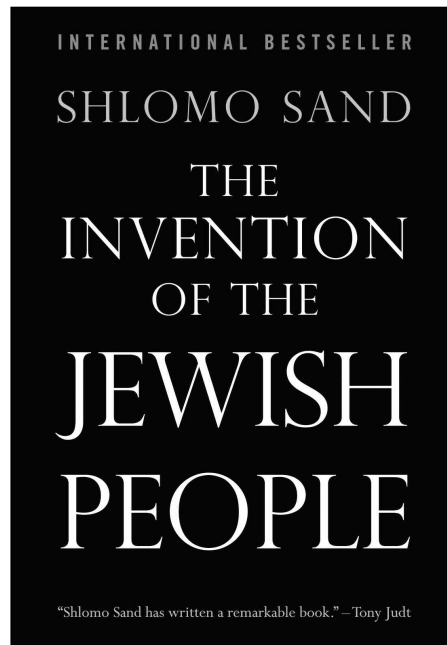
identity by Jewish intellectuals in 19th century Germany as creating the foundation for the Zionist and Jewish national movements. He faults the historical liberties taken by these German Jewish intellectuals, and in accounting for their confrontation with modern anti-Semitism in a liberal, intellectual society seems to take an unsympathetic point of view. He says of the Jewish historian Isaac Markus Jost, whose literary and scientific movement in Germany in the 1830s would influence “all Jewish studies in modern times,” and whose work, *A History of the Israelites from the Time of the Macabees to Our Time*, served as the prototype of modern Jewish historiography: “...he had doubts about the possibility of a symbiosis between Jews and non-Jews in the emerging German nation, and these doubts would intensify following the wave of conservatism during the 1830s with all its anti-Jewish currents.” Sand appears to castigate the targets of those currents, whose purpose, it seems, was to create a safe environment

for themselves, their families and their communities through their intellectual pursuits.

For me, the book’s strength stems from Sand’s argument that the migration of the meaning of words like “nation” and “people” has been under the command of history writers for millennia. The politically powerful have used those histories to create a consciousness of culture and interests directly opposed to those of other political groups. Sand defines this phenomenon as nationalism. And so starts Sand’s thesis that the Jewish “people,” far from being a homogenous subset of Semitic origin, reflects a diversity of population origins including African, Central Asian and European.

Sand makes a persuasive case that much of Jewish history is based on a panoply of myth and blatant propaganda. Aside from the biblical texts themselves, much of Jewish history is based on a few extant sources, Josephus, writing in the late Commonwealth era (37-100CE) being the most notable. In *The Antiquities of the Jews* Josephus states quite clearly that his history “will contain all of our antiquities, and the constitution of our government, as interpreted out of the Hebrew Scriptures.”¹ Josephus believed the stories, much as he believed himself to be a descendent of Aaron, Moses’ brother, noted in the biblical texts as the first Priest of the Hebrews. Sand correctly notes that future historians, Jewish and Gentile, will build upon the history as depicted by

continued on page 26



JEFF ZOLITOR is the former chair of the Congress of Secular Jewish Organizations (CSJO) and currently resides in Geneva, Illinois. He works with the local Jewish group Fox Valley Jewish Neighbours on community events and establishing an independent Jewish education program for young people. He has contributed several articles to Outlook, most recently a review/essay of Dan Ross’ Acts of Faith: A Journey to the Fringes of Jewish Identity (Nov./Dec. 2005).

¹ Flavius Josephus – *The Antiquities of the Jews*, tr. William Whiston, Preface Para. 2

IDENTITY... Continued from page 23

Josephus. Whether that history is true or accurate—Sands thinks not—is a matter best left to scientific inquiry, and that inquiry has not as yet turned up anything compelling to authenticate it. Josephus' work was on firmer ground when he wrote about contemporary, or near contemporary, events from the Second Commonwealth of Jewish history, roughly 530 BCE - 70CE. This period had many contemporary historians from many backgrounds to authenticate it. But, as Sands asserts, those histories were still not without bias.

Josephus died before the event that Sand acknowledges as most compelling, namely, the Diaspora. The traditional account of the travails of the Jewish people from antiquity to modern times begins with the exile of the Jewish people from Judea after the Roman wars of 70 and 135CE. It is here that Sand's proposition, and his research, gains credibility. Martin Goodman, in his beautiful book, *Rome and Jerusalem: The Clash of Ancient Civilizations*, references the Christian historian Eusebius, who himself referenced an earlier author, Ariston of Pella, that after the 135CE rebellion, also known as the Bar Kokhba Revolt, Hadrian "absolutely prevented the Jewish nation from entering even the district around Jerusalem"² which he had completely destroyed in the campaign. The Jewish city was renamed Aelia Capitolina, and the entire province was renamed Syria Palaestina. Still, nowhere in any of the sources quoted is there mention of a wholesale exile of the inhabitants of Judea.

Further, Goodman quotes the Christian author Jerome regarding a war between Jews and Samaritans happening in 197 CE³, 62 years after the supposed exile of the Jewish population, indicating that there was still a large enough Jewish population to conduct a war. This would also indicate that, despite the destruction of the Temple and the banishment from Jerusalem, there remained enough of a Jewish population in the former Judea to complete the final arrangement of the Mishna, the redaction of Jewish oral traditions and foundation of the Talmud, and create what some refer to as the golden age of Jewish thought in Judea at the time of Judah ha-Nasi, Judah the Prince, around 200CE.

The most likely scenario for any Jewish population transfer after the Roman wars is that many of the revolutionary fighters and political leaders were exiled or sent to Rome as captives; and perhaps many Jews left on their own accord after the humiliating destruction of their prized institutions. Sands asserts that such departures, far from the total depopulation of the region, could not account for the number and diversity of the world Jewish population today. The most recent assessment of the DNA profile of today's Jewish population bears this out. Sands asks, if the majority of today's Jewish population does not have specific Semitic origins, then what exactly is our historical connection to Eretz Yisroel? His answer: none.

Of the people who stayed on the land in the centuries after the Roman destruction of Jerusalem, most were poor farmers, bedouins and tradespeople whose day-to-day survival trumped religious ideology. Whether the religious ideology *du jour* was pagan, Jewish or Muslim, the poorest of the land did what they had to in order to survive. If it meant paying taxes to Rome, or tithes to Jerusalem, or acknowledging Mohammed as the prophet of God, their survival and that of their families was paramount. One thing seems clear—there have always been poor people living on the land to subjugate.

On the period of Roman rule, Sand promotes the idea that even with Judaism's official marginalization within the Christian Roman Empire, pagans and even Christians were becoming Jewish proselytes, a phenomenon similarly related by Goodman in *Rome and Jerusalem*, and in greater depth in his book, *Mission and Conversion: Proselytizing in the Religious History of the Roman Empire*. This can be further inferred from the text of⁴ The Council of Elvira in 306 CE, presumably the first church council to promote penalties for Christian-Jewish interaction. Were Jews seen as a benign entity within the Roman/Christian world, there would have been no need to enact laws that restricted interaction. In fact, conversion to Judaism was occurring at this time, and such conversion, forced or otherwise, is related in stories throughout the biblical texts, within the contemporary purview of Josephus, before, during and after the rise of both Christianity and Islam, in the Middle Ages, and in Europe, Africa and Asia.

To further underscore the role of conversion in Jewish diversity, Sand supports Arthur Koestler's claim in *The Thirteenth Tribe* that the majority of Eastern European Jews came from Central Asia and possibly descended from the Khazars, a Turkic tribe that converted to Judaism in around the 8th century. This contradicts the theory that Eastern European Jews migrated from France and Italy through Germany, accounting for the origin of Yiddish, which is predominantly German.⁵ YIVO, the Institute for Jewish Research, supports the idea that Yiddish developed in Germany around the 10th century when Jews from Italy and France settled in the German Rhine Valley. YIVO also admits that citing Yiddish origins in Germany is but one of several theories. Linguists Dr. Robert King and Dr. Alice Faber, in research started in the 1980s,⁶ found no significant similarities between the Yiddish of Eastern Europe and the dialects of German spoken in the Rhine Valley, as one would expect from a language that developed in that region. Instead, King and

² Martin Goodman, *Rome and Jerusalem*

³ "The Chronicle of St. Jerome, 244th Olympiad" -www.tertulian.org/fathers/jerome_chronicle_03_part2.htm

⁴ The Council of Elvira—Catholic University of America-www.faculty.cua.edu/pennington/Canon/Law/ElviraCanons.htm

⁵ YIVO - <http://www.yivo.org/about/index.php?tid=57&aid=146>, "What is Yiddish? Overview"

⁶ *The New York Times*, October 29, 1996, "Scholars Debate Roots of Yiddish, Migration of Jews," by George Johnson

Faber found striking similarities between Yiddish and the language of Bavaria, the region of modern Germany near the Danube River bordering the Czech Republic. They conclude that Yiddish likely originated due to a migration from the east, possibly from Slavic lands. Adding another twist to this story is the idea that the word “Ashkenaz,” found in biblical passages, refers to the Scythians, also known as the Assyrians, an ancient civilization of Central Asia. Philologos, the language columnist of the *Jewish Daily Forward*,⁷ traces the ethnic-linguistic families of the Bible beginning with Noah’s sons, Shem being associated with Semitic peoples and languages, Ham with Africans, and Yefet with Indo-Europeans. Of Yefet’s seven sons, Gomer can be associated with the inhabitants of Asia Minor—the Assyrians. By Talmudic times, the Assyrians were long gone and the rabbis, trying to identify the ancient land of Gomer, applied the phonetic resemblance to the country the Romans referred to as Germania. From that time on “Ashkenaz” was associated with Germany, further complicating the story of Jewish migration and the origins of Yiddish.

From the beginning of political Zionism in the late 19th century, Sand tells us, the history as written in the Bible and as related by Josephus and others was underwritten by Jewish historians as a pretext for a Jewish state occupying the land demarcated in those sources. He tells us that religious and political leaders have knowingly and purposefully promoted the myth of a national pedigree, a collective Jewish homeland and a continuous presence there, to sway public opinion, as when he refers to David Ben-Gurion’s speculation that the ancient “patriotic Hebrews did not migrate en masse to Egypt but remained in the country[Israel] and that only a single family emigrated”⁸, implying that there has always been a Jewish/Hebrew presence in the homeland since Abraham. Sand further suggests a coordinated campaign to discredit those who question Jewish origins, as Arthur Koestler did in *The Thirteenth Tribe*.

Sand also makes the point that from the beginning the State of Israel has circumvented the original intent of the UN. The UN required “guaranteeing to all persons equal and non-discriminatory rights in civil, political, economic and religious matters...”⁹ Parts of Israel’s Proclamation of Independence seem to comply with the UN requirements, as in Paragraph 12, “it will ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex...” Sand argues that there is a huge gulf between intent and practice. He implies that the very first paragraph of the Proclamation, “The Land of Israel was the birthplace of the Jewish people. Here their spiritual, religious and political identity was shaped. Here they first attained to statehood, created cultural values of national and universal significance and gave to the world the eternal

Book of Books” shows ambivalence towards those requirements, and a nationalism based on bad history.

Sand argues that Israel “expropriated half of their [Palestinian] land, and kept them under military government and harsh restrictions until 1966, but legally they were Israeli citizens,” showing hypocrisy in the State of Israel’s application of the UN requirements, simultaneously marginalizing the Palestinians while granting them citizenship.

What makes this book compelling and provocative is what Sand argues in the first chapter. He draws attention to the inherent problems of identity in general, and Jewish identity in particular. What passes for a Jewish identity in the world, does not necessarily pass the test in Israel. Persons wishing to emigrate to Israel under the Law of Return as a Jew by “religion” or “nationality” must be a “person who was born of a Jewish mother or who has converted to Judaism.”¹⁰ The conversion process, whatever the processes accepted by the Israeli Rabbinat, is the basis of ever-expanding case law in Israel, but the question has yet to be resolved. Jewish identity is less stringent in the rest of the world, whether one considers Jewish identity in the modern, secular and pluralistic society of North America, or that of Europe. Sand asserts that Jewish group identity in general, and its extension—Israeli nationalism—is based on false assumptions and/or bad history. This has made the nationalism of Israel seem schizophrenic.

Sand has tried to shine a bright light on what he believes to be Israeli and Zionist hypocrisy, while hoping we get the message before it is too late. He hopes his readers will understand that the Zionist claim to sole sovereignty of the land is arrogant at best, and knowingly dangerous and fictitious at worst. Sand argues that the story has changed, and continues to change, based not on fact but on nationalistic interests, however defined. He hopes we make the connection between a factual telling of history and the right of the Palestinian people to their homeland.

Arthur Koestler wrote of his thesis in *The Thirteenth Tribe*, “I am aware of the danger that it may be maliciously misinterpreted as a denial of the State of Israel’s right to exist. But that right is not based on the hypothetical origins of the Jewish people, nor on the mythological covenant of Abraham and God; it is based on international law – i.e., on the United Nations decision in 1947...”¹¹

continued on page 37

⁷ The *Jewish Daily Forward*, July 01, 2008,

⁸ *ibid*

⁹ UN General Assembly Resolution 181, Part I, Section B., para. 10d - 1947

¹⁰ Law of Return, Amendment 2, Definition 4B

¹¹ Arthur Koestler, *The Thirteenth Tribe*, appendix IV

J STREET...

Continued from page 16

pulled off! Their message is not so different from other existing organizations, but they were able to co-ordinate huge numbers to speak all together, all at the same time, and re-direct significant positive attention from the mainstream media under their umbrella. How did they do that? More importantly, where is our equivalent umbrella connecting voices of Jews, inside or outside Canadian Jewish organizations, who are pro-Israel, anti-occupation and anti-BDS? How did they organize the now 140,000 on-line voices? Where is our Lobbying Day? If U.S. politicians need money or votes to be convinced of the worthiness of a perspective, what do Canadian politicians need? How can we liberate Jews in our own communities to feel comfortable criticizing Israeli government policies without fear of being hated by our Jewish families and friends, called anti-Semitic and self-hating? Can J Street have an impact on settlement building without involvement in the BDS campaign? I am not certain of the answer to that question.

At a small gathering of local "questioning" Jews (from our Potlucks for Peace dialogue group and Canadian Friends of Peace

Now) last fall—our post-J Street conference—we identified two accomplishments of greatest interest on J Street's part: 1) Gathering together many Jews to communicate under one umbrella, thus giving them the courage to speak out while learning from each other. 2) Organizing a lobby campaign as part of their Political Action committee. It was suggested that we ourselves might start with the first step, so we did. Some of us in Ottawa now have a list serve, the purpose of which is to connect Jews who are interested in learning about a pro-Israel, anti-occupation and anti-BDS approach who were not previously connected. If there are Jews from other Canadian locations who would like to join our online discussion, we would welcome that. Here in Ottawa, I learn from listening to the many different perspectives of Jewish and non-Jewish organizations speaking out on the Middle East. Yet I am sick at the realization that while we exchange words, Palestinians are being denied basic human rights, for example in Sheikh Jarrah, the Palestinian neighborhood I learned about at the J Street conference. Some of us have discussed inviting a J Street representative to come to Ottawa, so we can learn from their experience both as organizers in the U.S.

Jewish community and in educating North American Jews on human rights issues in Israel. How can we influence our own Canadian government to support the human rights of Palestinians and Israelis? I welcome your thoughts.♦

For more information on J Street look up: www.jstreet.org.

Postscript (May 5): It's been seven months since J Street's first conference in Washington, DC, and the organization and the reality in the Middle East continue to evolve. I hear about J Street's substantial lobbying efforts with Obama and Israel via e-mails from Isaac Luria, their Vice-President for Communications and New Media. They sound impressive, although it is difficult to judge how successful they have been in influencing their targets—the U.S. and Israeli governments. Plans for settlement expansion continue, and Obama is not publicly pushing Israel towards real change. To ensure the success of J Street, it is now very important to publicly question, critique and judge the actions that they undertake. It is up to their members, the wider Jewish community, and the media to keep them honest to their initial intentions, or to live with the consequences.♦

JEWISH IDENTITY...

Continued from page 27

Israel's notion of an historic claim to the land it holds falls far short of a legitimate reason for its existence. The history, even as it was known to the founders of the modern Jewish state, does not accommodate such a claim. For it to do so we would have to acknowledge the infallibility of history as it is related in Biblical and tangential Jewish texts, as well as the uninformed history as related by early Jewish intellectuals and Zionists. No one engaged in the factual pursuit of Jewish history can honestly do that. What we can do is acknowledge that an assembly of sovereign states in 1947 decided that a Jewish state was appropriate and necessary, and it should be located

ed in part of the territory known as Palestine, then under the territorial control of Great Britain. That should be enough.♦

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