

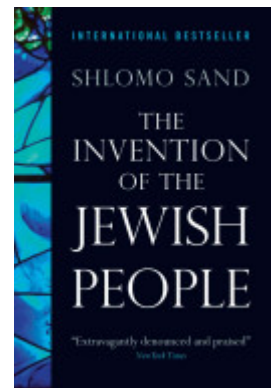
# Israeli Scholar Disputes Founding Myth

**From the Archive:** As Israel again “mows the grass” in Gaza taking revenge on Palestinians for firing crude missiles into Israeli territory the myth upon which the Jewish government stakes its claim to the land is front and center. But the myth faces challenges even inside Israel, as Morgan Strong reported in 2009.

By Morgan Strong (Originally published April 12, 2009)

The founding narrative of the modern State of Israel was born from the words in the Torah (or Old Testament), that God granted Abraham’s descendants the land of Israel and that Moses led the Jewish people out of Egypt to conquer it.

A second part of the narrative was the story of the Diaspora that after Jewish uprisings against the Romans in the First and Second centuries A.D., the Jews were exiled from the land of Israel and dispersed throughout the Western world. They often were isolated from European populations, suffered persecution, and ultimately were marked for extermination in the Nazi Holocaust.



Finally after centuries of praying for a return to Israel, the Jews achieved this goal by defeating the Arab armies in Palestine and establishing Israel in 1948. This narrative spanning more than three millennia is the singular, elemental and sustaining claim of the State of Israel as a Jewish nation.

But a 2008 book by Israeli scholar Shlomo Sand challenges this narrative, claiming that beyond the religious question of whether God really spoke to Abraham and Moses the Roman-era Diaspora did not happen at all or at least not as commonly understood.

In *When and How Was the Jewish People Invented?* [published in English as *The Invention of the Jewish People*], Dr. Sand, an expert on European history at the University of Tel Aviv, says the Diaspora was largely a myth that the Jews were never exiled *en masse* from the Holy Land and that many European Jewish populations converted to the faith centuries later.

Thus, Sand argues, many of today's Israelis who emigrated from Europe after World War II have little or no genealogical connection to the land. According to Sand's historical analysis, they are descendents of European converts, principally from the Kingdom of the Khazars in eastern Russia, who embraced Judaism in the Eighth Century, A.D.

The descendants of the Khazars then were driven from their native lands by invasion and conquest and through migration created the Jewish populations of Eastern Europe, Sands writes. Similarly, he argues that the Jews of Spain came from the conversion of Berber tribes from northern Africa that later migrated into Europe.

### **The Zionist Narrative**

Sand, himself a European Jew born in 1946 to Holocaust survivors in Austria, argues that until little more than a century ago, Jews thought of themselves as Jews because they shared a common religion, not because they possessed a direct lineage to the ancient tribes of Israel.

However, at the turn of the 20th Century, Sand asserts, Zionist Jews began assembling a national history to justify creation of a Jewish state by inventing the idea that Jews existed as a people separate from their religion and that they had primogeniture over the territory that had become known as Palestine.

The Zionists also invented the idea that Jews living in exile were obligated to return to the Promised Land, a concept that had been foreign to Judaism, Sand states.

Like almost everything in the Middle East, Sand's scholarship is fraught with powerful religious, historical and political implications. If Sand's thesis is correct, it would suggest that many of the Palestinian Arabs have a far more substantial claim to the lands of Israel than do many European Jews who arrived there asserting a God-given claim.

Indeed, Sand theorizes that many Jews, who remained in Judea after Roman legions crushed the last uprising in 136 A.D., eventually converted to Christianity or Islam, meaning that the Palestinians who have been crowded into Gaza or concentrated in the West Bank might be direct descendants of Jews from the Roman era.

Despite the political implications of Sand's book, it has not faced what might be expected: a withering assault from right-wing Israelis. The criticism has focused mostly on Sand's credentials as an expert on European history, not an expert on ancient Middle Eastern history, a point that Sand readily acknowledges.

One critic, Israel Bartal, dean of humanities at the Hebrew University, attacked Sand's credentials and called Sand's thesis "baseless," but disagreed mostly over Sand's assertion that the Diaspora story was created as an intentional myth by Zionists seeking to fabricate a direct genealogical connection between many of the world's Jews and Israel.

"Although the myth of an exile from the Jewish homeland (Palestine) does exist in popular Israeli culture, it is negligible in serious Jewish historical discussions," Bartal wrote in the newspaper Haaretz. "Important groups in the Jewish national movement expressed reservations regarding this myth or denied it completely.

"The kind of political intervention Sand is talking about, namely, a deliberate program designed to make Israelis forget the true biological origins of the Jews of Poland and Russia or a directive for the promotion of the story of the Jews' exile from their homeland is pure fantasy."

In other words, Bartal, like some other critics, is not so much disputing Sand's historical claims about the Diaspora or the origins of Eastern European Jews, as he is contesting Sand's notion that Zionists concocted a false history for a cynical political purpose.

But there can be no doubt that the story of the Diaspora has played a key role in the founding of Israel and that the appeal of this powerful narrative has helped the Jewish state generate sympathy around the world, especially in the United States.

"After being forcibly exiled from their land, the people remained faithful to 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," reads the preamble to the Israeli Declaration of Independence.

### **Reality from Mythology**

In January 2009, as the Israeli army bombarded Palestinians in Gaza in retaliation for rockets fired into southern Israel, the world got an ugly glimpse of what can result when historical myths are allowed to drive wedges between people who otherwise might have a great deal in common.

After the conflict ended with some 1,400 Palestinians dead, including many children and other non-combatants the Israeli government investigated alleged war crimes by its army and heard testimony from Israeli troops that extremist Rabbis had proclaimed the invasion a holy war.

The troops said the Rabbis brought them booklets and articles declaring: "We are

the Jewish people. We came to this land by a miracle. God brought us back to this land, and now we need to fight to expel the non-Jews who are interfering with our conquest of this holy land.”

In his book and in an interview with Haaretz about his book Sand challenged this core myth. In the interview, he said:

“I started looking in research studies about the exile from the land a constitutive event in Jewish history, almost like the Holocaust. But to my astonishment I discovered that it has no literature. The reason is that no one exiled the people of the country.

“The Romans did not exile peoples and they could not have done so even if they had wanted to. They did not have trains and trucks to deport entire populations. That kind of logistics did not exist until the 20th Century. From this, in effect, the whole book was born: in the realization that Judaic society was not dispersed and was not exiled.”

Asked if he was saying that the true descendants of the inhabitants of the Kingdom of Judah are the Palestinians, Sand responded:

“No population remains pure over a period of thousands of years. But the chances that the Palestinians are descendants of the ancient Judaic people are much greater than the chances that you or I are its descendents.

“The first Zionists, up until the Arab Revolt [1936-1939], knew that there had been no exiling, and that the Palestinians were descended from the inhabitants of the land. They knew that farmers don’t leave until they are expelled.

“Even Yitzhak Ben-Zvi, the second president of the State of Israel, wrote in 1929 that, ‘the vast majority of the peasant farmers do not have their origins in the Arab conquerors, but rather, before then, in the Jewish farmers who were numerous and a majority in the building of the land.’”

Sand argues further that the Jewish people never existed as a “nation race” but were rather an ethnic mix of disparate peoples who adopted the Jewish religion over a great period of time. Sand dismisses the Zionist argument that the Jews were an isolated and seminal ethnic group that was targeted for dispersal by the Romans.

Although ruthless in putting down challenges to their rule, the Romans allowed subjects in their occupied territories a great many freedoms, including freedom to practice religion, freedom of speech, and freedom of assembly.

Thousands of Jews served in the Roman legions, and there was a sizable Jewish

community in Rome itself. Three Jewish descendants of Herod the Great, the Jewish Emperor of Jerusalem, served in the Roman Senate.

Jewish dietary laws were respected under Roman law, as well as the right not to work on the Sabbath. Jewish slaves 1,000 carried to Italy by Emperor Titus after crushing the first Jewish rebellion in 70 A.D. were bought and set free by Jewish families already long settled into Roman society.

After the final Jewish rebellion, the Bar Kokhba revolt of 132-136 A.D., historians say the Romans placed restrictions on Jews entering Jerusalem, which caused other areas, such as Galilee in northern Palestine, to become centers of Jewish learning. But there is little or no evidence of a mass forced relocation.

Sand says the Diaspora was originally a Christian myth that depicted the event as divine punishment imposed on the Jews for having rejected the Christian gospel.

### **Genetic Evidence**

There has been no serious rebuttal to Sand's book, which has been a bestseller in Israel and Europe. But there were earlier genetic studies attempting to demonstrate an unbroken line of descent among Ashkenazi Jews in Europe from the Hebrew tribes of Israel.

In a genetic study published by the United States National Academy of Sciences, the Y chromosomes of Ashkenazi, Roman, North African, Kurdish, Near Eastern, Yemenite, and Ethiopian Jews were compared with 16 non-Jewish groups from similar geographic locations. It found that despite long-term residence in different countries and isolation from one another, most Jewish populations were not significantly different from one another at the genetic level.

Although the study also demonstrated that 20 percent of the Ashkenazim carry Eastern European gene markers consistent with the Khazars, the results seemed to show that the Ashkenazim were descended from a common Mid-Eastern population and suggested that most Jewish communities have remained relatively isolated from neighboring non-Jewish communities during and after the supposed Diaspora.

However, a monumental genetic study entitled, "The Journey of Man," undertaken in 2002 by Dr. Spencer Wells, a geneticist from Stanford University, demonstrated that virtually all European males carry the same genetic markers found within the male population of the Middle East on the Y chromosomes.

That is simply because the migration of human beings began in Africa and coursed its way through the Middle East and onward, stretching over many thousands of years. In short, we are all pretty much the same.

## **Obsessive Delusion**

Despite the lack of conclusive scientific or historical evidence, the Diaspora narrative proved to be a compelling story, much like the Biblical rendition of the Exodus from Egypt, which historians and archeologists also have questioned in recent years.

It is certainly true that all nations use myths and legend for sustenance; some tales are based on fact, others are convenient self-serving contrivances.

However, when myth and legend argue for excess, when they demand a racial, ethnic or religious purity to the exclusion of others so that some prophecy can be fulfilled or some national goal achieved reason and justice can give way to extremism and cruelty.

The motive for creating the state of Israel was to provide respite for the Jews of Europe after World War II, but that worthy cause has now been contorted into an obsessive delusion about an Israeli right to mistreat and persecute Palestinians.

When right-wing Israeli Rabbis speak of driving non-Jews out of the land that God supposedly gave to the Israelites and their descendants, these Rabbis may be speaking with full faith, but faith is by definition an unshakable belief in something that taken by itself cannot be proven.

This faith or delusion also is drawing in the rest of the world. The bloody war in Iraq was an appendage to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, as is the dangerous rise of Islamic fundamentalism across the region. There is also now the irony that modern Israel was established by Jews of European origin, many of whom may be ethnically unconnected to Palestine.

Another cruel aspect of this irony is that the descendants of the ancient Israelites may include many Palestinians, who are genetically indistinct from the Sephardic Jews who were, like the Palestinians, original and indigenous inhabitants of this ancient land.

Yasir Arafat told me quite often that the Israelis are really cousins of the Palestinians. He may have been wrong; they are more likely brothers and sisters.

**Morgan Strong is a former professor of Middle Eastern history, and was an advisor to CBS News "60 Minutes" on the Middle East. He is author of the ebook, *The Israeli Lobby and Me.***

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