

What if the entire tale of the Jewish Diaspora is historically wrong?

What if the Palestinian Arabs who have lived for decades under the heel of the modern Israeli state are in fact descended from the very same "children of Israel" described in the Old Testament?

And what if most modern Israelis aren't descended from the ancient Israelites at all, but are actually a mix of Europeans, North Africans and others who didn't "return" to the scrap of land we now call Israel and establish a new state following the attempt to exterminate them during World War II, but came in and forcefully displaced people whose ancestors had lived there for millennia?

What if the entire tale of the Jewish Diaspora -- the story recounted at Passover tables by Jews around the world every year detailing the ancient Jews' exile from Judea, the years spent wandering through the desert, their escape from the Pharaoh's clutches -- is all wrong?

That's the explosive thesis of *When and How Was the Jewish People Invented?*, a book by Tel Aviv University scholar Shlomo Zand (or Sand) that sent shockwaves across Israeli society when it was published last year. After 19 weeks on the Israeli best-seller list, the book is being translated into a dozen languages and will be published in the United States this year by Verso.

Its thesis has ramifications that go far beyond some antediluvian academic debate. Few modern conflicts are as attached to ancient history as that decades-long cycle of bloodletting between Israelis and Palestinians. Each group lays claim to the same scrap of land -- holy in all three of the world's major Abrahamic religions -- based on long-standing ties to that chunk of earth and national identities formed over long periods of time. There's probably no other place on Earth where the present is as intimately tied to the ancient.

Central to the ideology of Zionism is the tale -- familiar to all Jewish families -- of exile, oppression, redemption and return. Booted from their kingdom by the Romans around 2,000 years ago, the "Jewish people" -- sons and daughters of ancient Judea -- wandered the earth, rootless, where they faced cruel suppression from all corners -- from being forced to toil in slavery under the Egyptians, to the Spanish massacres of the 14th century and Russian pogroms of the 19th, through to the horrors of the Third Reich.

This view of history animates all Zionists, but none more so than the influential but reactionary minority -- in the United States as well as Israel -- who believe that God bestowed a "Greater Israel" -- one that encompasses the modern state as well as the Occupied Territories -- on the Jewish people, and who resist any effort to create a Palestinian state on biblical grounds.

Inventing a People?

Zand's central argument is that the Romans didn't expel whole nations from their territories. Zand estimates that perhaps 10,000 ancient Judeans were vanquished during the Roman wars, and the remaining inhabitants of ancient Judea remained, converting to Islam and assimilating with their conquerors when Arabs subjugated the area. They became the progenitors of today's Palestinian Arabs, many of whom now live as refugees who were exiled from their homeland during the 20th century.

As Israeli journalist Tom Segev summarized, in a review of the book in Ha'aretz:

There never was a Jewish people, only a Jewish religion, and the exile also never happened -- hence there was no return. Zand rejects most of the stories of national-identity formation in the Bible, including the exodus from Egypt and, most satisfactorily, the horrors of the conquest under Joshua.

But this begs the question: if the ancient people of Judea weren't expelled en masse, then how did it come to pass that Jewish people are scattered across the world? According to Zand, who offers detailed histories of several groups within what is conventionally known as the Jewish Diaspora, some were Jews who emigrated of their own volition, and many more were later converts to Judaism. Contrary to popular belief, Zand argues that Judaism was an evangelical religion that actively sought out new adherents during its formative period.

This narrative has huge significance in terms of Israel's national identity. If Judaism is a religion, rather than "a people" descended from a dispersed nation, then it brings into question the central justification for the state of Israel remaining a "Jewish state."

And that brings us to Zand's second assertion. He argues that the story of the Jewish nation -- the transformation of the Jewish people from a group with a shared cultural identity and religious faith into a vanquished "people" -- was a relatively recent invention, hatched in the 19th century by Zionist scholars and advanced by the Israeli academic establishment. It was, argues Zand, an intellectual conspiracy of sorts. Segev says, "It's all fiction and myth that served as an excuse for the establishment of the State of Israel."

Zand Gets Slammed; Do His Arguments Stand Up?

The ramifications of Zand's argument are far-reaching; "the chances that the Palestinians are descendants of the ancient Judaic people are much greater than the chances that you or I are its descendants," he told Ha'aretz. Zand argues that Israel should be a state in which all of the inhabitants of what was once "British Palestine" share the full rights and responsibilities of citizenship, rather than maintaining it as a "Jewish and democratic" state, as it's now identified.

Predictably, Zand was pilloried according to the time-tested formula. Ami Isseroff, writing on ZioNation, the Zionism-Israel blog, invoked the customary Holocaust imagery, accusing Zand of offering a "final solution to the Jewish problem," one in which "No auto da fe is required, no charging Cossacks are needed, no gas chambers, no smelly crematoria." Another feverish

ideologue called Zand's work "another manifestation of mental disorder in the extreme academic Left in Israel."

That kind of overheated rhetoric is a standard straw man in the endless roil of discourse over Israel and the Palestinians, and is easily dismissed. But more serious criticism also greeted Zand's work. In a widely read critical review of Zand's work, Israel Bartal, dean of humanities at the Hebrew University, slammed the author's second assertion -- that Zionist academics had suppressed the true history of Judaism's spread through emigration and conversion in favor of a history that would give legitimacy to the quest for a Jewish state.

Bartal raised important questions about Zand's methodology and pointed out what appears to be some sloppy details in the book. But, interestingly, in defending Israel's academic community, Bartal supported Zand's more consequential thesis, writing, "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 added: "no historian of the Jewish national movement has ever really believed that the origins of the Jews are ethnically and biologically 'pure.'" He noted that "[i]mportant groups in the [Zionist] movement expressed reservations regarding this myth or denied it completely."

"As far as I can discern," Bartal wrote, "the book contains not even one idea that has not been presented" in previous historical studies. Segev added that "Zand did not invent [his] thesis; 30 years before the Declaration of Independence, it was espoused by David Ben-Gurion, Yitzhak Ben-Zvi and others."

One can reasonably argue that this ancient myth of a Jewish nation exiled until its 20th century return is of little consequence; whether the Jewish people share a common genetic ancestry or are a far-flung collection of people who share the same faith, a common national identity has in fact developed over the centuries. But Zand's central contention stands, and has some significant implications for the current conflict between Israel and the Palestinians.

Changing the Conversation?

The primary reason it's so difficult to discuss the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians is the remarkably effective job supporters of Israel's control of the Occupied Territories -- including Gaza, still under de facto occupation -- have done equating support for Palestinian self-determination with a desire to see the destruction of Israel. It effectively conflates any advocacy of Palestinian rights with the specter of Jewish extermination.

That's certainly been the case with arguments for a single-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Until recent years, advocating a "single-state" solution -- a binational state where all residents of what are today Israel and the Occupied Territories share the full rights and responsibilities of citizenship -- was a relatively mainstream position to take. In fact, it was one of several competing plans considered by the United Nations when it created the state of Israel in the 1940s.

But the idea of a single, binational state has more recently been marginalized -- dismissed as

an attempt to destroy Israel literally and physically, rather than as an ethnic and religious-based political entity with a population of second-class Arab citizens and the legacy of responsibility for world's longest-standing refugee population.

A logical conclusion of Zand's work exposing Israel's founding mythology may be the restoration of the idea of a one-state solution to a legitimate place in the debate over this contentious region. After all, while it muddies the waters in one sense -- raising ancient, biblical questions about just who the "children of Israel" really are -- in another sense, it hints at the commonalities that exist between Israeli Jews and Palestinian Arabs. Both groups lay claim to the same crust of earth, both have faced historic repression and displacement and both hold dear the idea that they should have a "right of return."

And if both groups in fact share common biblical ties, then it begs the question of why the entirety of what was Palestine under the British mandate should remain a refuge for people of one religion instead of being a country in which Jews and Arabs are guaranteed equal protection -- equal protection under the laws of a state whose legitimacy would never again be open to question.

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