

Author of 'The Invention of the Jewish People' vents again

The concept of homeland is one of the most amazing and most ruinous of the modern era, says Prof. Shlomo Sand.

By Dalia Karpel 12:34 24.05.12 ■ 17

Tweet 0

The concept of homeland is one of the most amazing and also, perhaps, one of the most ruinous of the modern era, says Prof. Shlomo Sand. In his new book, "When and How Was the Land of Israel Invented?" (Kineret, Zmora-Bitan Dvir, Hebrew), Sand examines the attitude of the Zionist movement toward that territory since its inception. More particularly, he is out to discover how Zionism adopted the idea of the "historic right" to that land, and consolidated an ethos based on the memory of an ancient people whose ancestors were Hebrews who lived in the Kingdom of Judah in the First and Second Temple periods. According to Sand, the Land of Israel was not the historic homeland of the Jewish people.

"Zionism plundered the religious term 'Land of Israel' [Eretz Yisrael] and turned it into a geopolitical term," he says. "The Land of Israel is not the homeland of the Jews. It becomes a homeland at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th – only upon the emergence of the Zionist movement."

Sand's previous book, "The Invention of the Jewish People" (Verso, 2009; translated by Yael Lotan), stirred a furor. Sand rejected the existence of a Jewish people that was exiled two millennia ago and survived. The majority of the Jews of Eastern Europe, he maintained, are descendants of societies or of individuals who were converted to Judaism on European soil. This concept flagrantly contradicts Israel's Declaration of Independence, according to which "Eretz-Israel (the Land of Israel, Palestine) 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" [source: Israeli Foreign Ministry]. Sand argues that for 2,000 years the Jews did not constitute a people and that only religion, belief and culture united them.

It was to be expected that "The Invention of the Jewish People" would not be greeted in Israel with great acclaim. However, its author admits that he did not imagine the book "would fall with the impact of a bomb." The negative reactions have been diverse. Some rejected outright the principal conclusion and the historical facts on which it was based, while others dismissed the research and claimed there was nothing new in the book, that everything was known and accepted, at least by historians. (For a slightly different reason he was also disappointed when the Arabic-language edition of the book was published in Ramallah: Sand was not invited to the book launch, though he was hosted at Al-Quds University in Jerusalem by the institution's president, Prof. Sari Nusseibeh.)

That was about four years ago, but the hostility toward him seems to be intensifying. Recently, he says, he has been receiving more hate mail and getting obscene phone calls. Last week, he received an envelope in the mail that contained a white powder and a letter branding him an "anti-Semite" and a "Jew hater," together with a promise that his days were numbered.

"The Invention of the Jewish People" was on Israel's best-seller lists for 19 weeks and has been translated into 16 languages. Editions in Chinese, Korean, Indonesian and Croatian are in the works. In March 2009, he received the Aujourd'hui Award, presented by French journalists for a leading nonfiction political or historical work. Previous winners of the award include renowned scholars such as Raymond Aron and George Steiner.

Sand also racked up a lot of flying time en route to lecture on the book in France, Britain, Canada, the United States, Belgium, Japan, Russia, Germany, Slovenia, Morocco, Bulgaria, Hungary, Sweden, Finland, Norway and Italy. His desk drawer and inbox contain hundreds of letters from around the world, from both Jews and adherents of other religions, taking issue with him.

Sand teaches political ideas and cultures in the history department of Tel Aviv University. When he walks down the corridors of the Gilman Building, which houses the Faculty of Humanities – where he was a student 40 years ago and afterward returned as a lecturer following 10 years in Paris – he feels a growing sense of loneliness. Colleagues who were once his friends and invited him to their homes pass him by as though he were invisible. "They are just envious," Sand snaps.

Do you feel pleased to be at the center of a controversy in which so many scholars have attacked you?

"A man of my age who decided to write these books and became a pariah of the academic community in Israel gets no enjoyment from it. I would rather be liked, and not squabble. I am liked better abroad. Scholars from Tony Judt to Eric Hobsbawm ... told me the book is groundbreaking. I have an ego like everyone else, and maybe a little more, and without such appreciation I could not have written the new book. I imagine that people will find a few mistakes in it, too. It is impossible to cruise across civilizations and cultures over that span of time without making mistakes. In the previous book, the most vituperative review found four mistakes, which have since been corrected. But if someone were to prove that the book's basic theses are totally unfounded, that would crush me."

Are you aware of the fact that some of your critics hold you in contempt?

"They are not contemptuous, they hate me. [Historian] Anita Shapira accused me of 'denying the Jewish people,' but added that the book is brilliant. [Historian] Israel Bartal, who assailed me and "The Invention of the Jewish People,' is living off me by appearing on all kinds of academic platforms around the world and arguing against the book. I understand that the book generated considerable distress."

Why?

"If my thesis is correct, and 500 years ago there was no French people, Russian people, Italian people or Vietnamese people – and, by the same token, no Jewish people – and the story of the exile of a Jewish people in the first or second century C.E., in conjunction with the destruction of the Second Temple was imagined – the implication is that historians from the departments of the history of the Jewish people have been dealing with brara [Hebrew slang for rubbish] for years. Their departments have no legitimization. You will not find a department of the history of the English people at Cambridge University. Along comes Sand, from the Department of General History, and claims these people are working in a department that is a myth and whose existence is unjustified, because there was no Jewish people of a single extraction. If I am right, they are standing on water."

Nationalizing the Bible

"And all the congregation of Judah, with the priests and the Levites, and all the congregation that came out of Israel, and the strangers that came out of the land of Israel, and that dwelt in Judah, rejoiced."

– 2 Chronicles 30:25

The idea for the new book, Sand says, was sparked by the criticism of “The Invention of the Jewish People.”

“The pro-Zionist British historian Simon Schama wrote that my book had failed in its attempt to sever the connection between the land of the forefathers and the Jewish experience. Other critics wrote that my intention had been to challenge the Jews’ historic right to their ancient homeland, the Land of Israel. I was surprised. Not for a moment did I think the book challenged that right, because I never thought the Jews had a historic right to this land.

“I never imagined,” Sand continues, “that at the beginning of the 21st century there would be critics who would justify Israel’s existence through arguments based on patrimony thousands of years old. Since I have been aware of myself, I have defended our presence here owing to the plight of the Jews, from the end of the 19th century, when Europe spewed out the Jews and the United States shut its gates at a certain stage, and not because of national yearnings or historical right.”

Were you persuaded that “Invention” is a flawed book?

“I realized that the book was not sufficiently balanced and that I had to add what was missing by means of another study, about the modes of invention of the Land of Israel as a territorial space of the Jewish people. This refers to the concept of the Land of Israel in Zionist historiography, focusing on territory and on the settlement process that has been going on here for the past 120 years.

“I applied my theoretical assumptions both in regard to the emergence of nations and peoples, and with respect to the term ‘homeland.’ I examined when this place became a national territory for the Jews and why it was necessary to adhere at any cost to the narrative of a people with one origin, who left its homeland 2,000 years ago, wandered and wandered, reached the gates of Moscow, made a U-turn and decided to return to its native land.

“The second myth that needed to be deconstructed is that the Land of Israel was always the property of the Jewish people and was promised it by God, who even gave his emissaries a deed of title, namely the Bible, which Zionism, despite its secularity, nationalized and turned into a salient work of history.”

In this year’s Bible quiz, at Pesach, Minister of Education Gideon Sa’ar said, “We believe with all our heart that the actualization of settlement is a return to the land of our forefathers and that this right is intertwined with the Jewish people’s right to national security ... The patriarch Abraham and the patriarch Jacob came to Beit El and Hebron almost 4,000 years ago, long before they were the subjects of media interest.”

“There is no such thing as national territory that has belonged to the Jewish people since the biblical period, and I prove that in the book. That is a mythic statement which is characteristic of national leaders in the modern history of the last 200 years. The territorial myth has worked well since the start of the 20th century. Zionism is not the only case. To create nations in the present and with a view to the future, ‘eternal’ peoples are created with a view to the past. Seventy years ago, every Frenchman was convinced that he had been a Gaul, just like the Germans in the first half of the last century, who believed they were the direct descendants of the Teutons. That [sort of perception] generally disappears amid the philosophy and thought and everyday life of the Western Europeans. Here, though, it remains implanted within the historical-political consciousness of many Israelis.”

Many studies cast doubt on the Bible’s historical truths. In his new book, “Ha-Shem: The Secret Numbers of the Hebrew Bible and the Mystery of the Exodus from Egypt” (Hebrew), Prof. Israel Knohl, who is religiously observant, challenges the Mount Sinai event as it is described in the Torah, and maintains that the Exodus from Egypt has no connection with reality.

“I have a higher regard for studies by archaeologists such as Israel Finkelstein and Ze’ev Herzog from Tel Aviv University, and for the Bible scholar Nadav Na’aman, but I do not agree with all of them. I am far more persuaded by Bible research conducted by non-Israeli and non-Zionist scholars, like Niels Peter Lemche, Philip Davies and Thomas Thompson. I rely on them and have adopted their approach that the Bible was written more or less between the fifth century B.C.E. and the third century C.E. It began to be written after the political-intellectual elite was exiled from Judah to Babylon. The books of the Bible were apparently composed only after many of those who had been in Babylon came to Jerusalem with the agreement of the Persians. There is no doubt that the talented authors knew the meaning of exile first-hand: It resonates like a concrete threat throughout the Torah and the books of the prophets.

“Researchers such as Thompson view the Bible as theological fiction: In the same way that Shakespeare’s ‘Julius Caesar’ is not informative in regard to the ancient period of imperial Rome, the Bible cannot teach us historical facts. The stories in the Bible are the basis of Western civilization and also the basis for the New Testament and the Koran. They are astonishing literary texts, but the last thing they are is history books – which is why I, as a historian, ignore them. Finkelstein and Herzog found that the Exodus from Egypt never happened and that the land of Canaan was not conquered swiftly; not to mention Abraham, who is a mythological figure. In short, I think that modern Jewish nationalism – Zionism – took theology and turned it into history.”

Christian heritage

“Now when Herod died, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, saying: Awake, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel; for those who sought the life of the child are dead.”
– Matthew 2: 19-20

The word homeland (moledet, in Hebrew), appears 19 times in the entire Hebrew Bible, about half of them in Genesis, but the term refers to one’s land of birth or to the place from which a family originates. The heroes of the Bible never set out to defend their homeland in order to win an election or for reasons of political patriotism, Sand points out in the new book. The biblical texts, he writes, show that the “Jahwist religion” did not spring up in the territory which God earmarked for his chosen ones. Indeed, he emphasizes, according to the Bible itself the birth of monotheism occurred outside the Promised Land.

God appears for the first time in the context of a passage about Haran, in today’s southern Turkey, where he commands Abram, an Aramean, “Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father’s house, unto the land that I will show thee” (Genesis 12:1). Abram indeed makes his way to the land, but does not stay there long and goes on to Egypt. The second encounter with God – the giving of the Law to Moses – takes place in the Sinai desert, according to the Bible, after the Exodus from Egypt.

Sand reminds his readers that neither Abraham (as Abram is later referred to) nor Moses were natives of Canaan. Abraham sends his son, Isaac, back to his homeland to marry, and Isaac in turn sends his son, Jacob, from Canaan to Aram Naharayim, where he marries Leah and Rachel, and fathers 12 sons and one daughter with them and with his concubines. The sons, together with Joseph’s two sons, will become the “fathers” of the Tribes of Israel; all were born in a foreign land with the exception of Benjamin, who was born in Canaan.

“Abraham, his wife, his son’s bride, the daughters-in-law and concubines of his grandson and nearly all his great-grandchildren were, according to the mythic story, natives of the northern Fertile Crescent who immigrated to Canaan at the commandment of the Creator,” Sand writes. He recalls that all of Jacob’s sons “went down” to Egypt, where his offspring – that is, the “seed of Israel” – were born in the course of 400 years and did not hesitate to marry local women.

In that case, what is the origin of the term “Land of Israel” as the homeland of the Hebrews?

"In my view, the term appeared after the Romans changed the name of the country from Judah to Syria-Palestine, and people then started to emphasize the term 'Land of Israel.' But in the Talmud it is an area that extends geographically from south of Acre to north of Ashkelon, and the term appears in the context of a commandment. The Talmudic Land of Israel is not a geopolitical term; it is a theological term which refers to a holy land whose residents must obey special commandments relating to that land."

Sand notes that neither in the past nor today does the term "Land of Israel" correspond to the area of jurisdiction of the State of Israel. In Hebrew it has been used for many years as the standard name for the region that lies between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River. In the fairly recent past, it was also applied to extensive areas east of the Jordan.

Sand looked in vain for the term "Land of Israel" in both Books of Maccabees and in the historical writings of Josephus Flavius, all of which are about the Second Temple period. "When he [Josephus] describes the territory that was the arena of the events for the rebellion," Sand writes, "he divides it into three separate lands: the land of Galilee, the land of Samaria and the land of Judah. These three regions do not constitute a single territorial unit, and the Land of Israel as a 'concept' is not to be found in his writings."

Sand reached the conclusion that the name "Land of Israel," as one of the many epithets for this territory – others being Holy Land, land of Canaan, land of Zion, land of the Hart – probably first appeared after the destruction of the Second Temple, and, ironically, in the Gospel of Matthew in the New Testament. However, even that is an exceptional one-time usage: the New Testament generally preferred "land of Judah."

Within Jewish communities as well, the term "Land of Israel" only took root some time after the destruction of the Second Temple, when Jewish monotheism showed signs of regression across the Mediterranean Basin in the wake of the failure of three anti-pagan revolts that were fomented within 70 years (the Great Revolt, the Diasporic Revolt and the Bar Kochba uprising). It was only in the second century C.E., when the Romans named the territory Palaestina and many of the inhabitants began to convert to Christianity that we find, in the Mishna and the Talmud, the first hesitant use of the "Land of Israel," Sand notes.

But that term, he writes, in its Christian or Jewish rabbinic version, differs from its modern meaning: "It was not until the beginning of the 20th century, after a sojourn of years in the crucible of Protestantism, that the theological Land of Israel was finally converted and polished as a saliently geo-national term."

Yet the Declaration of Independence tells a different story: "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. Impelled by this historic and traditional attachment, Jews strove in every successive generation to re-establish themselves in their ancient homeland."

"This land is a holy place in which it is difficult to subsist. I cite, without distortion, references about how careful the Jews were not to live here, because they feared they would desecrate the holy soil due to the great burden of fulfilling the precepts on it. They were concerned at the possibility of contaminating the holy place by pursuing everyday life: having children, falling ill and so forth.

"For 1,600 years believing Jews did not want to come here. The Talmud contains an explicit prohibition 'not to storm the wall,' which remains in force from the Talmudic period until the time of Moses Mendelssohn, the first of the Jewish philosophers of the modern era. They all know that the Jewish people must not 'storm the wall,' meaning that there must not be a collective immigration to the Holy Land."

Why did Christian pilgrims come to the Holy Land in their masses, whereas only few Jews came, and even those for the most part only to die and be buried there?

"I was surprised to discover that thousands of Christian pilgrims came here, whereas until the 11th century we do not know of one case of a Jewish pilgrim. Other testimonies, too, do not suggest that Jews came here before the 11th century. We know about the poet and thinker Rabbi Yehuda Halevi, who planned to come to the Holy Land in the year 1140 but did not succeed. One reason for this is that the Jews belonged to conservative communities who feared for their very existence and did not welcome spontaneous private journeys. A Jew who wanted to embark on a journey like this knew that there was no institutional structure to help him.

"The Christian pilgrim, in contrast, could avail himself of churches and inns everywhere. The journey was also far more difficult for Jews, who had to eat kosher food and fulfill the precepts and ensure the existence of a prayer quorum. Jews came to the Holy Land at the end of their life, in order to die and be buried there and thus to ensure themselves a place in the next world. Why did my father's grandfather betray his family, take all the savings and travel from Lodz to Jerusalem? Because he wanted to be like those who pass you on the right: He wanted to be first before the onset of the resurrection of the dead."

You write that it is not the homeland idea that spawned nationalism, but nationalism that spawned the homeland in the modern era. Was it Zionism that set this development in motion among the Jews?

"No. Zvi (Heinrich) Graetz wrote his 11-volume 'History of the Jews' beginning in the 1850s. That is the first proto-national work of [Jewish] history. Graetz invented the Jew in the modern sense of the term and set his place of birth in a Middle Eastern land. He writes: 'Such a strip of land was Canaan (now called Palestine), which abuts the border of Phoenicia in the south and lies along the Mediterranean coastline.' He did not know what the Land of Israel was or where its borders lay, as he mentions at the beginning of the book.

"The first practical Zionist," Sand continues, "was Israel Belkind, who was one of the first settlers in Palestine, before the emergence of Palestinian nationalism. Belkind, the coordinator of the Bilu movement [whose members arrived in Palestine in 1882], wrote that the Arabs were descended from the ancient Hebrews. He and the first Bilu group, he added, encountered 'a good many of our people, our own flesh and blood.' Belkind drew his map: In the north the land extended as far as Acre, in the east to the Syrian desert and in the south as far as the river of Egypt.

"Similarly, Eliezer Ben Yehuda, in his book 'Land of Israel,' published in 1883 in Jerusalem, imagines the new land according to 'the borders of Moses' Torah, from Wadi el-Arish to Sidon, from Sidon to Mount Hermon.' They conjure up an imagined territory and take the Bible as proof of its existence. They do not believe in God, but they believe in the Promised Land. Before dying, God promised them the land.

"The first book that demarcates and analyzes borders was written in Yiddish, in 1918, by the two brilliant intellectuals of the period. Its title is 'The Land of Israel in the Past and the Present' and the authors are Yitzhak Ben-Zvi and David Ben-Gurion. Their map of the Land of Israel encompasses both sides of the Jordan, includes the El Arish region and extends to Damascus."

What about the Zionist Congresses?

"Herzl talked about a territory. There were no borders here in his period, because the country was part of the Ottoman Empire, and the word 'Palestine' refers to an indeterminate region. The term 'Palestine-Land of Israel' was devised by representatives of the British Mandate. The first Zionist Congresses used the term 'Palestine' but did not yet talk about borders; the Bible resonates powerfully in the background. That is very important. What, after all, is Zionism? It is a secular movement that knows it has to exploit a myth and turns to the Bible. Zionist leaders from Max Nordau to Arthur Ruppin took the Bible and turned it into secular history. This should not be considered manipulation per se; they truly believed in that. Such creators of myths cling to the myths and need land and an eternal people; in their imagination they construct a national territory. Zionism, which thought big, appropriated the term 'Land of Israel' from the Talmudic heritage and translated it into a national geopolitical term."

Recollections of '67

"On the 29th November, 1947, the United Nations General Assembly passed a resolution calling for the establishment of a Jewish State in Eretz-Israel; the General Assembly required the inhabitants of Eretz-Israel to take such steps as were necessary on their part for the implementation of that resolution."

– Declaration of the Establishment of the State of Israel, May 14, 1948

Sand opens his new work by sharing with his readers a personal experience. His aim is to make clear the source of his intellectual approach to the mythology of "national soil, tombs of ancestral forefathers and large chiseled stones." On June 5, 1967, Sand was a young reserve soldier in a brigade that fought in the Jerusalem area. His battalion conquered the Abu Tor neighborhood, at a heavy cost: 17 soldiers killed and dozens wounded. "My luck held, and with no few efforts I remained alive." After the battle he and his buddies were taken to see the Western Wall.

"The size of the hewn stones made me fearful," Sand writes. "I remember feeling small and very weak in their presence. I did not yet imagine that it had never been the wall of the Temple and that for most of the period since the destruction – in contrast to the summit of the Temple Mount, where Jewish believers were forbidden to tread for fear of being contaminated by the dead – it had not been considered a holy place."

However, he continues, "secular agents of culture" started to recreate a tradition with the aid of so-called victory albums and focused on a photograph of three soldiers [the reference is to a photo by David Rubinger of soldiers at the Wall – eds.], "their eyes blurred with 2,000 years of longing for the thick wall and their hearts overflowing at the 'liberation' of the land of the forefathers."

After the war, Sand and other soldiers were sent to guard the Intercontinental Hotel atop the Mount of Olives, previously in Jordanian hands (today it is the Seven Arches Hotel), adjacent to the old Jewish cemetery. When he called his father to tell him where he was, the latter reminded him about the story of his grandfather, a Hasid from Lodz, who decided shortly before his death to make the trip to Jerusalem and be buried on the Mount of Olives.

Shlomo Sand was born in 1946 in a refugee camp in Linz, Austria. He was raised in a secular communist home. His father left the synagogue to protest the removal of his mother (Sand's grandmother) from the front rows after her husband died and she could not afford the price of the seat. Sand's father did not want to have him circumcised, but when he went to Hamburg to demonstrate against the forced disembarkation of the illegal immigrants aboard the Exodus on German soil, his mother and grandmother yielded to tradition and to social pressure. ("I am in favor of circumcision on condition that everyone circumcise himself," Sand says.)

In 1948, Sand's communist father decided that his place was in Palestine, alongside the fighters against the British forces. The family moved into an abandoned apartment in Old Jaffa. Sand's father found work as a porter and as a night guard in the building of the Communist Party; his mother worked as a cleaning woman. At his parents' recommendation, Sand joined the Communist Youth League as a teenager. In the meantime, the family moved to a two-room apartment near the Noga Cinema in Jaffa. Sand was not much of a student but devoured books. Thrown out of school in the 10th grade, he started to study electronics in the evening, working by day for a radio repair business.

Sand was drafted in 1965 into the Nahal paramilitary brigade, serving in Yad Hanna, a communist kibbutz. After his discharge he renewed his ties with the party. In 1968 he was offered the opportunity to join its ranks and to study film in Lodz. Instead, he signed a petition against the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia and stayed in Tel Aviv. He joined the radical left-wing group Matzpen and was arrested a number of times for distributing leaflets. But he did not remain long in Matzpen, either. Sand recalls that he was among the few in the group who were not at university, either as students or lecturers, and accordingly suffered from the power structure of the organization's intellectual hierarchy. In addition, the organization's questioning of Israel's existence was not to his liking, and he left.

After obtaining a matriculation certificate in 1971, he studied history and philosophy at Tel Aviv University. In 1975, he enrolled in the School for Advanced Studies in the Social Sciences in Paris, and wrote his doctoral dissertation on Georges Sorel and Marxism. Ten years later he returned to Israel and has been teaching at Tel Aviv University since. He is currently at work on a new book about identity politics in Israel and elsewhere, with the focus on the problem of maintaining a secular Jewish culture in the face of Israeli culture.

In his new work about the invention of the Land of Israel he reveals a secret he kept for 45 years. Two months after a stint of reserve duty in 1967, he was called up again and posted to the police station at the entrance to Jericho. The soldiers there told him that Palestinians who tried to cross the Jordan at night and return to their homes were gunned down systematically, whereas those who made the attempt in daylight were arrested. Sand was assigned to guard those prisoners.

One night in September 1967 he witnessed soldiers abusing an elderly Palestinian man who had been arrested with a large amount of dollars in his possession. "I climbed onto a crate and watched a harrowing scene through the window," he writes. "The detainee was sitting tied to a chair, and my good buddies were beating him all over and occasionally pressing burning cigarettes into his arms. I climbed down from the crate, threw up and returned to my post shaking and frightened. A little later, a pickup left carrying the body ... My friends shouted to me that they were going to the Jordan River to dump the body."

You were armed – why didn't you intervene? You could have fired in the air, summoned help.

"I lost my senses completely. I was afraid to intervene. The fact that I did not try to do anything to stop them depressed me for years and resonates within me to this day. That is why I write about in the book, because I still have guilt feelings. I am ashamed that I did not do anything. When I got back from reserve duty in Jericho, I went to see MK Meir Wilner [head of the Israel Communist Party] and told him about it. I also consulted with [the writer] Dan Omer, whom I had met during the fighting, when we both shook as we shot in Abu Tor. Omer, who was five years older than I, adopted me. He and Wilner said there were too many cases like that and there was nothing to be done. That night I felt that I had lost my homeland, namely my childhood neighborhood in Jaffa, along with my parents, the neighbors and the school. A concrete homeland that I lost at that time."

Why are you invoking this now?

"In the book I do a national reckoning. You know, I am not anti-national. I am an Israeli and you can call me an Israeli patriot. There are neighborhoods in Tel Aviv which I feel are mine, street corners connected to events and experiences of friendships and loves. Israeli patriotism is not only a discourse about land or war myths. It partakes of small loves and small demonstrations and experiences connected to Hebrew literature and language. I lived in France for 10 years, and readers of my books discern my Frenchness in the mode of analysis and the approach to theories, but the books are written in Hebrew. I am approaching the exit: I am at an advanced age and can no longer become someone else."

Did you go back to the murder of the Palestinian man in order to say, "Look, I am one of you and once I was even made to be a bit of a war criminal"?

"Like everyone, I too am a bit of a war criminal. That is part of my life. Some time after that reserve service in Jericho I became a daily activist in Matzpen and distributed leaflets and sprayed slogans on walls at night and got beaten up. I was a member of the political fringe. I am not a victim, but my psychological distress started then, at the age of 20. The years in Matzpen gave me a great deal, and the political activity was a type of healing. I later left the organization heartbroken, and in despair sank into drugs. My partner and my best friend got into heroin. Maybe because I am Polish I did not follow them, and instead of heroin I took matriculation exams and entered university. The best friend committed suicide. Others left the country."

You left too, but came back. Have you ever considered leaving Israel since then?

“My Israeliness is without Holocaust justifications. It is a simple, everyday Israeliness which I did not choose. There was a moment when I could have stayed in France; I already had French citizenship. I returned here because of the Tel Aviv sun, because of the beach and because of Jaffa. I recently reread the famous interview with [writer and journalist] Amos Elon, in which he explains why he is leaving Israel for Tuscany. He said he no longer wanted to live here. I do not want to leave. I write a book instead of pulling up stakes. I am not some idiot who thinks books change the world, but I know that when the world changes, people look for other books.”

It takes a village

“The State of Israel will be open for Jewish immigration and for the Ingathering of the Exiles; it will foster the development of the country for the benefit of all its inhabitants; it will be based on freedom, justice and peace as envisaged by the prophets of Israel; it will ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex; it will guarantee freedom of religion, conscience, language, education and culture.”

– Declaration of the Establishment of the State of Israel, May 14, 1948

Sand dedicates his new book to the memory of the inhabitants of the village of Sheikh Munis, “a specific space that is enshrined as a wound within me.” The last chapter discusses the history of the village, on whose land Tel Aviv University and several museums were built after its original, peace-seeking inhabitants became refugees in 1948. Sand himself, in addition to working at the university, lives in Ramat Aviv Gimmel – an upscale neighborhood that also stands on land of the former village.

He does not propose “to erase the university in order to establish a village and plant orchards instead.” He does believe, however, that “it is the State of Israel’s obligation to recognize the catastrophe that was inflicted on others by the very fact of its establishment.” As for the university, it should “place at the entrance gate a memorial plaque for those who were uprooted from Sheik Munis, the peaceful village that disappeared as though it had never been.”

Why, in a historical work based on research and theory, did you find it necessary to promote your view that Israel should be “a state of all its citizens”?

“In my previous books I focused on intellectualism and on the connection between history and cinema. In ‘The Invention of the Jewish People’ and in the new book I wanted to be more honest, and I reveal my ideological motivations. The two books constitute a direct and even scathing attack on Zionist historiography. I quote Walter Benjamin, who said that the historian should brush history against the grain.

“The fact that I espouse an ideology does not make me either a good historian or a bad historian. All historians possess an ideology. A historian who writes national historiography must acknowledge that. I decided to set forth my ideology so that the reader will understand that I am coming from a very specific place.”

Weren’t you afraid of reprisals?

“I did not think the first book would fall with the impact of a bomb. I knew it would stir opposition, but I did not imagine that it would engender a tumult. When [the journalist and critic] Boaz Evron put forward similar arguments in his 1988 book ‘A National Reckoning’ [English version, 1995: ‘Jewish State or Israeli Nation?'] – no one protested. I understand now that I went out on a limb. [Former MK] Avraham Burg told me that in the 1950s the Beitar Jerusalem soccer team [identified with the right-wing Herut party] had 5,000 fans and Hapoel Katamon [identified with the labor federation] had one fan. In one game the Beitar fans shouted ‘The ref is a son of a bitch’ and the Hapoel fan got up and attacked them. Burg said I am like that fan.”

Some people took it as a provocation, and maybe there is something a bit megalomaniac about it.

“I am deeply fearful and the opposite of a megalomaniac. Do you want to say that I am impelled by being egocentric? Yes and no. I ponder things. If I were a megalomaniac I would not have written these books. I would have written ‘A Short History of Mankind,’ for example [referring to a current Israeli best-seller].

“It is also not accurate to say that I am preaching a political approach. In my previous book I am critical of an ethnocentric state, and in the new book I set forth a critical approach to a country that expands endlessly.

“I would like to exchange Land of Israel patriotism – which clings to myths and cannot leave Hebron, and is leading us to be an occupier nation of a conquered population – for Israeli patriotism. I am against a binational state. As a democrat, I advocate an Israeli republic within the 1967 boundaries, because of the fact that Zionism has succeeded in forging a life, society, language and culture here that cannot be erased. The justification for our existence here is the fact that the Zionist project created here an Israeli people, not a Jewish people. The ideal thing would be a type of confederation between two republics: Israeli and Palestinian.”

Finally, did a Palestinian people exist?

“No. The Palestinians were Arabs who lived in this region for hundreds of years. Zionist colonization forged the Palestinian people. Of all the fine reviews I received, one that stood out was by Moncef Marzouki, who is now president of Tunisia. He wrote: We should applaud Shlomo Sand and we too are obliged to write books like these about the history of the Arabs.”

Shapira and Bartal vs. Sand

Prof. Anita Shapira heads the Chaim Weizmann Institute for the Study of Zionism and Israel at Tel Aviv University. This fall, University Press of New England will publish her book “Israel: A History,” which tells the story of Zionism, the pre-1948 Jewish community in Palestine and the State of Israel, “from the beginning until the 21st century.”

“There was nothing new in Prof. Sand’s first book,” Shapira says. “It is, after all, the old debate about nationalism, from the 1980s: Does nationalism contain an ancient historical core, or is it a creation of the 19th century? Other than resorting to extreme terminology, Sand does nothing there that we didn’t argue about earlier.

“We [in the institute] teach on the basis of an established historical concept that there was in fact a Jewish collectivity which considered itself a people – not only in the religious sense, but in the sense of an entity whose essence transcends the merely religious. The expression ‘All Jews are responsible for each other’ is not a religious one. Sand repeats the same mantras that were already trite in the 1980s and 1990s, and recycles them. (And, by the way, I did not say that Sand’s book is ‘brilliant’; I said it is well-written.)

“The Jews are an extraterritorial people. When a Jew in Europe cares for a Jew in Yemen, he does so because he identifies with him as a member of his people. In the case of the Damascus blood libel – when the Jews of France and Britain, who are ostensibly French and English people of the Mosaic faith, were outraged – it was because they identified with the Jewish nation. It is a national identity. I have not seen concern among Catholics for their coreligionists in another country.”

Says Prof. Israel Bartal, from the Department of the History of the Jewish People and Contemporary Jewry at the Hebrew University of

Jerusalem: "I am 'living off' Sand? That is a wild exaggeration. I don't recall ever having been invited to talk about his book. The only case in which I discussed his book was ... at a public event held at Tel Aviv University.

"I deplore the ... impertinent manner of speech which certain people take the liberty of using when their colleagues disagree with their opinions. It's a style that generates sorrow and compassion and is intended to arouse passions. My work deals with Eastern Europe and with Polish history, and when I read Sand I am somehow reminded of the Soviet Union of the 1930s and 1940s. I wrote a review of his first book, but I am afraid he did not grasp the depth of my criticism – namely, that he took most of his arguments from Zionist historiography and then claimed that what these departments are doing in the universities is of no importance.

"In fact, I am one of the first researchers of the history of the Land of Israel and the history of Jewish nationalism who argued that Zionism recreated the Jewish people as the concept of a nation. My first book described how the Zionist movement took a pre-modern group and redefined it as a people and a nation. What, then, is he saying that's new, and why does he say that it's the opposite of what the Zionist historians say?"

register with haaretz

First Name

Password

Last Name

Retype Password

Country

Email

Sign in with Facebook

Send >