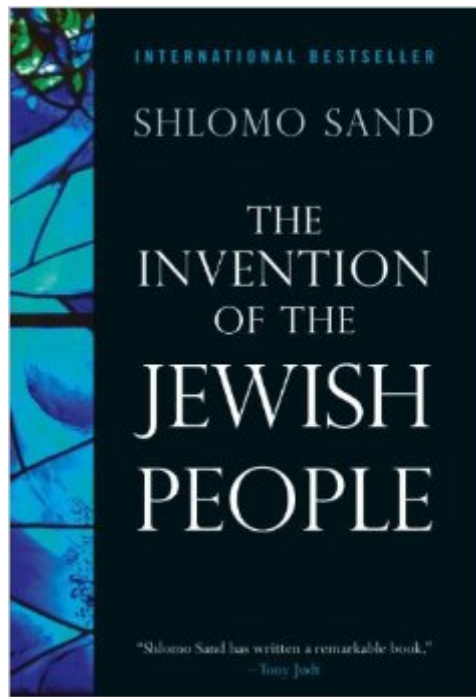


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The Invention Of The Jewish People



Synopsis

A historical tour de force that demolishes the myths and taboos that have surrounded Jewish and Israeli history, *The Invention of the Jewish People* offers a new account of both that demands to be read and reckoned with. Was there really a forced exile in the first century, at the hands of the Romans? Should we regard the Jewish people, throughout two millennia, as both a distinct ethnic group and a putative nation "returned at last to its Biblical homeland"? Shlomo Sand argues that most Jews actually descend from converts, whose native lands were scattered far across the Middle East and Eastern Europe. The formation of a Jewish people and then a Jewish nation out of these disparate groups could only take place under the sway of a new historiography, developing in response to the rise of nationalism throughout Europe. Beneath the biblical backfill of the nineteenth-century historians, and the twentieth-century intellectuals who replaced rabbis as the architects of Jewish identity, *The Invention of the Jewish People* uncovers a new narrative of Israel's formation, and proposes a bold analysis of nationalism that accounts for the old myths. After a long stay on Israel's bestseller list, and winning the coveted Aujourd'hui Award in France, *The Invention of the Jewish People* is finally available in English. The central importance of the conflict in the Middle East ensures that Sand's arguments will reverberate well beyond the historians and politicians that he takes to task. Without an adequate understanding of Israel's past, capable of superseding today's opposing views, diplomatic solutions are likely to remain elusive. In this iconoclastic work of history, Shlomo Sand provides the intellectual foundations for a new vision of Israel's future.

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Customer Reviews

About a fifth of this book shows how Biblical criticism and archaeological discoveries have undermined the reliability of the Hebrew Bible as history. Archaeology, among other things, has played havoc with the chronology of the Bible, especially in connection with the invasion of Canaan, nor has it found any evidence that would support the story of the Exodus or the splendour of Solomon's kingdom. But the main subject of the book is the denial that there is such a thing as the Jewish People, descended from the inhabitants of Biblical Palestine from which they have been scattered, and that they are a nation which has now returned to the land of its ancestors. This undermines one of the principal arguments with which the State of Israel legitimizes itself. (There are, of course, other arguments which Sand does not discuss in any depth.) He says that the Jews began to see themselves as an ethnic people, rather than as a religious community, in the 19th century. (In a 40 page long and massively theoretical opening chapter, Sand explains why for him the word 'people' implies ethnicity - hence the provocative title of his book. Others might well say that what has for centuries kept the Jewish 'people' together was not their ethnicity but their religion, and even secular Jews belong to that people because their ancestors were religious Jews.) He traces the claim of the Jews to be a nation from the 1880s - when scholars like Heinrich Graetz described the work of Julius Wellhausen, the father of modern Biblical Criticism, as anti-Jewish - to those who present the Biblical account as the foundation charter of the State of Israel, where it is the staple of the state educational system. During the Hellenistic and Roman periods, aided by the Septuagint (the translation of the Hebrew Bible into Greek), "hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions" of gentiles around the South-Eastern Mediterranean, from Rome to Armenia, converted to Judaism. A substantial proportion today's Jews cannot be linked genetically to the Jewish Homeland at all. Roman writers expressed unease at the growing number of converts. Around 400 CE the king of Himyar, in Yemen, converted to Judaism and so did many of their Arabic subjects in his and the following reigns during the next century. Most of the strong Yemenite community of Jews would be descended from these converts. There was a strong Jewish presence among the Berbers of North Africa, who took such a part in the later Arabic conquest of Spain. Sand thinks that many of these Berber Jews were also converts, though his formulations here are more tentative than elsewhere, and to support this idea he produces few hard facts beyond a complaint by the Christian Tertullian (2nd c.) against proselytes in North Africa and one quotation from the Arab historian Ibn Khaldun (14th c.). The best known conversion is that of the Khazar kingdom (between the Volga and the Dnieper) in the 8th century CE. In his famous book Arthur Koestler called the Khazars 'the Thirteenth Tribe', and Sand espouses the notion that after the Khazar kingdom was

destroyed in the 11th century, many of its people fled westwards to form a substantial proportion of the Jews in the Ukraine, in Poland and in Hungary. Sand shows the resistance of many Israeli historians to the idea that so many Jews might not be descendants of the Jews of Israel and Judah: they either deny it or ignore it in their researches and their text books. He also supports the notion, advanced in 1918 even by the young Zionists Ben-Gurion and Ben-Zvi, that the majority Muslim fellahin in Palestine were the descendants of Jewish peasants who had converted to Islam, perhaps to escape the jizyah (poll tax) which was levied on all non-Muslims after the Arab conquest. This idea was swiftly abandoned in the face of Arab nationalism, to be replaced by the notion that the Arab invaders had expelled the Jews (for which there is no evidence) and therefore had no right to the land which the Jews who had been forced into exile were now reclaiming. The last chapter falls into two parts. The first part discusses the debate about whether there is any genetic evidence for the theory that most Jews are descended from the original Jews of Palestine. Students of genetics are apparently divided about this, and while Sand gives the supporters of the theory a good run for its money, it is clear that he sides with their opponents, and sees a conscious or unconscious agenda in those Israeli studies which have been looking for a widespread common ancestry. Sand quotes many Zionist sources which claimed (as the Nazis did) that the Jews were indeed a race. That EXPRESSION has now lost all respectability, but the debate is still carried on, though now in terms of genetics rather than of 'blood'. Sand never leaves any doubt about the political conclusions he draws from all this. They are spelt out most explicitly in the second, hard-hitting, part of the last chapter, which dismisses the definition of the State of Israel as both a Jewish and a democratic state. It not only implies but in many ways acts in such a way that its non-Jewish people, though technically Israeli citizens, cannot be part of an Israeli nation, in the way in which, for example, Scots and Welshmen are part of the British (not English) nation. With little hope that it can happen, Sand calls for the Jews of Israel to transform their ideology into one that would "grant the Palestino-Israelis not only complete equality but also a genuine and firm autonomy" - not only in the interests of justice, but also to save the state from ultimate disaster. With its political implications, it is no surprise that this book has attracted both hatred and enthusiasm.

The basic premise of Shlomo Sand's book should be totally uncontroversial, I can see that the delivery might cause offense to some ultra Zionists, but it is common sense that no group of people could possibly remain racially pure while scattered across Europe and the middle East (and ultimately across the entire world). Jewish is on the one hand a term defining a religion, on the other a race, but more than both it has become a self defined term. If I say I am Jewish you will find it very

difficult to disprove my assertion (I do not need to be circumcised, I do not need to go to synagogue and although you may believe my Mother will need to be Jewish - frankly I don't need to agree with you). If I tell my Children they are Jewish they will probably believe me. If my children tell their children they are Jewish they will almost certainly think they are Jewish and identify with every other person who says they are Jewish, regardless of DNA or religion. Anyone who believes that integration of "outsiders" as Jews over the many centuries of the diaspora has not made the Jews at the very least a hybrid group frankly needs to believe in a supernatural force. I would never wish to argue with someones faith - but a faith in a God who requires racial purity is just a little worrying. It is also a little worrying that so many obviously intelligent and reasonable people have taken such vehement offence when reading "The invention of the Jewish People". Perhaps it is the title? Perhaps it is a perceived threat to the state of Israel? I find the most frightening arguments those based on the DNA analysis. I am a molecular biologist, I have read with great interest the papers on mapping human population spread using DNA profiles. I read with some anxiety the description of these generally excellent works as 'phylogenetic'. I read with terror the way these papers are used to support 'phylogenetic' hypotheses. These papers describe links between people, they may explain common susceptibility to disease. They do not describe formation of new 'species' separate from other 'species' of humans. They can only be properly used to join people not to exclude them. The detractors of Shlomo Sand seem to want to say that a separate species has evolved that is Jewish. This is just simply wrong. The people living in Israel may have a right to the land because of conquest; because they are now a majority; or simply because they have got bigger and better weapons (there is a long history of people establishing nations on this basis). There is also a theological argument to say they have a right to the land because they believe themselves to be Jewish and God gave the land to the Jews (not an argument I find particularly convincing). They can provide a theological argument, they cannot provide a genetic argument. No one has a genetic right to any particular piece of real estate (Jewish or Palestinian).

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