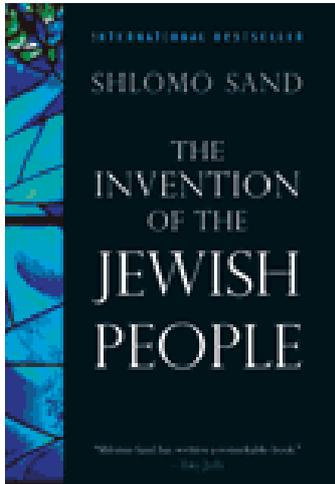


Shlomo Sand, *The Invention of the Jewish People*, Verso 2009, p. 344, US\$ 34,95.



In his speech before the yearly convention of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu referred many times to rights of „the Jewish people“ to settle anywhere in „the Land of Israel“ when he talked about Israel and its Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT) including East-Jerusalem. Perhaps he has not read Shlomo Sand's book „The Invention of the Jewish People“ and if he had read it, he had banished it from his mind. A "Jewish people" has not existed, it was an invention, and consequently there could be no exile. This, in brief, is the central thesis of the book by the Israeli historian Shlomo Sand, who teaches European history at the University of Tel Aviv. All the beautiful Bible stories are to be legends: the Exodus from Egypt, the Babylonian exile, the Roman occupation, including the destruction of the Second Temple and the associated displacement, and the triumphant return after 2000 years to "Zion" in the Zionist movement? Sand rejects almost all of these religious

legends. The Jewish Diaspora is not created by displacement, but through conversion to Judaism from different nations. It is self-explanatory, that such a frontal assault on "Israeli-Jewish" existence in Palestine will not be unopposed. Since the creation of the State of Israel, and even long before, the Zionist claims that the "Land of Israel" has been challenged by large segments of the Jewish population worldwide. The religious people argued that „Jewish identity“is something completely different from "Zionist identity". In this dilemma stands Israel ever since. And it is still hotly disputed like the book „A Threat from within. A Century of Jewish Opposition to Zionism“ by Jacov Rabkin shows just as the national histories of the German, French or Spanish are based on myths, so is the Jewish-Israeli one. However, Sand notes: Even if a group of people "were never a nation and its past is entirely invented, it retains the right to personal self-determination".

The destruction of the temple had been there, but no mass expulsion, because it has not been such in Roman history, writes Sand. "A closer examination of the historical event that had allegedly caused the 'second expulsion' of the year 70 AD, and the review of the concept of 'exile' and its importance in later Judaism, however, give indications that the historical awareness of different and separate events were put together based on different traditions. The only way they could become a useful myth, which serves the modern Jews as 'ethnic identity' hook." To the myth of the destruction the exile was added, although long before 70 AD large Jewish communities had existed outside of Judea. The majority of Jews remained in Palestine. After the conquest by Islam they converted in large numbers or may have been assimilated into this religion. Consequently, the real Jews in Palestine were the Palestinians, the descendants of the original population in Judea and Canaan.

Shlomo Sand's thesis was represented before the state of Israel was founded by David Ben-Gurion. The leading Zionist representatives never had anything to do with the Jewish inhabitants of Palestine. They were by no means their offspring, but most of them were "Khazar", a citizen of a kingdom of the Khazars. In the 8th and early 9th Century, the Turkic people from the Caucasus fully converted to Judaism, under the motto: "cuius regio eius religio," says the author. This thesis had been represented by Arthur Koestler in "The Thirteenth Tribe". Now it is supported by Sand as previously scientifically by Israel Bartal. For the author, the origin of the "Yiddish Culture" was not based on an import from Germany, but it is the result of a connection between the descendants of the Khazars and the Germans who traveled to the East, some of them were merchants. Because of the ethical diversity of Israel, the author insinuates that the identity of Israel would be met more by a "state of all its citizens" than a "Jewish state". Such a claim is raised by a few

far-sighted Israelis and Israel's 1.5 million Palestinian citizens who have been suffering with massive discrimination since 1948.

The consequences of Sand's thesis would lead to an equality of all non-Jewish citizens of Israel, because the claimed connection to the historic tribes to the state of Israel, as the historical mythology of the Zionists assert, does not exist. A direct genealogy of Moses via New York City to the settlers in the West Bank is a myth. A coherent national population had never existed, but different groups which had adopted the Jewish religion. Hence the colonization of the Palestinian territories occupied by Israel is not only against international law but also historical baseless, as there has been no such thing as "Eretz Israel" (Land of Israel) before. This myth was created, following Sand's historical narrative, only in the last 100 years by the Zionist colonization. According to the book of John Rose "The Myths of Zionism" Ben-Gurion was the greatest Zionist "myth-maker." Not without reason the Zionists gave up the terms "people" or even "nation", even though all features were available. "The specific historical nature of this society was denied and rejected by its founders and designers over and over again. She was appointed by Zionism, and one must add, by the Arab nationalism as 'Nichtvolk' (non-people) and with 'Nichtnation' (non-nation) perceived', it was only part of the wider world Jewry, which should continue to return to Eretz Israel (Palestine)." Those "property rights" based on the mythical concept of "Eretz Israel" and pseudo-religious legal titles to the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT) are therefore null and void, not to mention international standards.

Sand's book is a contemporary critique of Israeli identity politics, and it breaks the biggest taboo in the country. In the chapter on "Judaism and Democracy - an oxymoron?" the author presents a variety of political ideas over this Israeli dilemma. Despite all the changes, Israel existed more than 60 years as a "liberal ethnocracy". For Sand, this cannot continue ad infinitum. His vision for Israel seems to himself "to be a utopian hallucination": "The Jewish hyper identity needs a thorough transformation to adapt to the cultural ferment-living reality over which it reigns. This identity must go through an open Israelization by offering itself to all citizens of the state. It is too late to transform Israel into a unified and homogenous nation state. Therefore one has to invite the strangers to a Israelization in order to create a multicultural democracy, similar to that developed in Britain or Holland, and to allow to the full equality of the Palestinians and their institutional autonomy." Together with the preservation and maintenance of their culture and their institutions, there has to be an invitation to be in the center of power of the hegemonic Israeli culture. Every Palestinian-Israeli girl and every boy needs, if they want, to have access to a career that can bring them to the centers of Israeli culture and Israeli actions. Every Jewish-Israeli boy and every girl needs to be aware that they live in a country in which there are many equal 'other' living, writes the author.

The book has not only triggered a fierce debate in Israel. For many Israelis Sand's thesis are political virgin territory, they are diametrically opposed to the official Israeli interpretation of history. The author has already come under severe pressure, making a German edition doubtful. At least, the English readers and before them the French ones could enjoy the light in the darkness. It is a very fascinating, exciting, even revolutionary book.

Ludwig Watzal