

11-2014

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Recommended Citation

Hechiche, Abdelwahab Hiba (2014) "The Words and the Land: Israeli Intellectuals and the Nationalist Myth," *International Dialogue*: Vol. 4, Article 14.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.32873/uno.dc.ID.4.1.1090>

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/id-journal/vol4/iss1/14>

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Review

The Words and the Land: Israeli Intellectuals and the Nationalist Myth

Shlomo Sand. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2012. 240pp.

Abdelwahab Hiba Hechiche *

Shlomo Sand opens this book with a significant sentence: “Every book is part autobiography” and, consequently, “autobiographical confession” (7). Although he was born in 1946, his early recollection has been marked by a certain residue of the consequences of the Shoa, because as a child he was an eyewitness of the living conditions of people “like his Polish parents moving from one “displaced persons camp to another” (8). But during that same period of his early childhood, his memory resonated with his father’s reminding him that “we had taken someone else’s home” (8). The reader begins to witness an existential ethical debate within the conscience and consciousness of that child in Jaffa. The reader also is moved into entering the same stream of consciousness between memory and history as the result of Europe’s electing to spit us out or was it? asks Sand in his effort to re-construct what he saw and what he was told. The precocious young Shlomo Sand was to be exposed, certainly fed with two histories,

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two views of world history: “The Communist Time” and “The Zionist Time,” although the two shared the same idea of progress as a means to a better life.

For the attentive and compassionate reader, especially one who, as a non-Jew has witnessed German soldiers looking for “Juden” far away from Europe, in Tunisia, the young and precocious Shlomo Sand sounds like the precocious and inquisitive Voltaire, especially when the author writes: “In their own ways, these two sensibilities gave me an insatiable desire to contribute to a redemption and it was only much later, and with some sadness, that I escaped the hold of their myths” (9). In practical terms, the universal values of communism gave the young Shlomo Sand an advantage over his Jewish peers: His early contacts and communist activities allowed him to mingle with and befriend young Arabs, in particular Mahmoud Moussa. That experience gave him the opportunity to “quickly see the contradictions between the universal values proclaimed by Zionist socialism in the 50s and the 60s, and the daily discrimination on a national and linguistic level that caused his friend who wanted so badly to be Israeli, to suffer” (10). This is easy to understand by any individual or group of people who, under colonialism or under any form of oppressive rule, believed in assimilation but were never fully accepted. Hasn’t the Jewish experience been the same before and after the Dreyfus Affair? Like any required catalyst for a lucid awakening, two historic events happened almost simultaneously, “causing the first doubts about the possibility of historical progress” (11). The first was the June 1967 War, and the second the 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia by the Soviet Union and its Warsaw Pact satellites, an event which “chased away Shlomo Sand’s dreams of communism” (11).

Well-versed in or indoctrinated by the ideology of the extreme left wing of Matzpen, the still young Shlomo Sand began to contribute to what later would be called “Post Zionism.” The reader may ask whether events were going to shape this promising young intellectual’s ideas or whether his ideas were going to give events a better analysis than the one formulated and propagated by those that conduct and control domestic and foreign policies (13). The October 1973 War was to be a new turning point for the young activist’s decision “never to wear a uniform again”(13). But this sounds like the easier part of the intellectual and ideological dilemma Shlomo Sand was to struggle with. Peace-loving non-Jewish thinkers who struggled with similar a dilemma regarding Zionism and Judaism had for ethical reasons to eventually accept “*le fait national*

israelien.” President Bourguiba did it in 1965 with his audacious and courageous appeal to the Palestinians from Jericho, not from his Carthage Palace.

Early in his book, Sand makes it clear that he was not abandoning his people or his attachment to his new country. “I continued to define my identity as an Israeli and defend the State of Israel’s right to exist at a time when Marxist-Leninists of all types and Arab students were not ready to accept this nuance...” (14). I would support this view on the basis of his own experience of attempts at “peace discussions” during his graduate studies in Paris in the early sixties. Clearly, one of the central points of Sand’s book is presented as follows: With 25% of the Israeli population being non-Jewish, how could Israel continue to exist as a democracy if it defines itself exclusively as a “Jewish State” for all the Jews of the world, but not for its non-Jewish citizens who speak Hebrew and participate in the Israeli economy and culture? This *de facto* situation is rejected by Sand as it has been by other intellectual and friends of Israel, including former President Jimmy Carter.

Shlomo Sand’s more complex and more original ideas are to be found in his theoretical and analytical discussion of distinguished scholars’ philosophies encountered during his graduate studies in Europe, especially in Paris, and Israel. His maturing philosophical and theoretical analysis of his concern about the becoming—in Jean-Paul Sartre’s existentialist sense—of the Zionist dream seems to have been enriched by Isaiah Berlin’s 1973 visit to the University of Tel-Aviv for his presentation of *The Philosophy of Violence*. But the central and profound area of Sand’s philosophical and theoretical work was his fascination with George Sorel, until he understood how and why the very controversial Sorel has been seen as a source of inspiration for fascist leaders: Extreme leftists may become extreme rightists. After all, Sand’s presentation “Sorel, the Source of the Fascist Thinking” was to be appreciated by one of the leading scholars of modern terrorism, Walter Liqueur. “The connection between the extreme Left and the extreme Right, leading inescapably to totalitarianism, has always been part of the imagination of many neo-liberal scholars, and they gladly welcomed the image of Sorel at this crossroad”(17). Sand’s original thought was to suggest how to follow ideas from Mussolini to Sorel, not the opposite, and from Robespierre to Rousseau, not the opposite (19–20). Sand’s immersion into the work of scholars such as Pierre Bourdieu, Jacques Julliard, François Furet, and Jacques Revel seem to have prepared him for a critical re-examination of Zionism and Socialism. While interacting with some of those

distinguished scholars, Sand's intellectual brilliance was so remarkable that Julliard offered him the opportunity to stay in Paris to pursue his work on Sorel. Meanwhile, through the course "Zionism and Socialism," Sand was inspired to re-examine the approaches to Jewish nationalism by Ber Borochov, Bernard Lazare, and Martin Buber. By refusing the prestigious offer by Julliard, Sand revealed his attached to his country, not only because of the opportunity to teach at the University of Tel-Aviv, but also because he wrote: "To be honest, the same intellectual and mental conflict that had caused to leave 'the Jewish Democracy' a decade earlier played a role in my decision to return..." (20). For a time, he believed that "public reaction to the Lebanon war had made it possible to create a serious political and theoretical opposition to both occupation and the ethno-centric nationalism at the base of Zionist culture. Unlike Albert Camus, who yearned sun-filled lands but preferred to live in Paris, I missed Israeli warmth, both in its climate and its people. I also wanted to be closer to my parents, who remained emigrants until their last days..." (21).

Looking at history from a universal angle, Sand questioned the uniqueness of Jewish suffering through what the late and regretted Rabbi David Hartman—the founder of the Shalom Hartman Institute—used to call the "exilic experience" in his book *Israelis and the Jewish Tradition: An Ancient People Debating its Future*. For Sand, "Continuing to take dividends from the capital of suffering of prior generations is a relatively common phenomenon. It can be found in the intellectuals of the Third World who frequent Parisian salons, and the descendants of Armenians, among Palestinian refugees and the descendants of French Jews...But I have serious reservations today about directors—Shlomo Sand dealt with the importance and power of audio-visual aids in comparison with the written words—and intellectuals who continue to promote the uniqueness of the Jewish victims, making them the sole martyrs and forbidding a comparison with other victims" (22). This sounds like a prophetic statement for the January 2014 new public debate in Israel with regard to the criminalization of the use of the word 'Nazi' if used for a non-educational purpose (*The New York Times*, 18 January 2014). Whereas the French version of this book *Les Mots et la Terre* was published in 2006, this very controversial idea of the uniqueness of Jewish victimhood was echoed in 2008 by the former Speaker of the Knesset, the Honorable Avraham Burg in his book *The Holocaust is Over: We Must Rise from Its Ashes*. Sand goes even further in his refutation of the uniqueness of Jewish tragic suffering with his extremely sharp, detached, and lucid critical thinking of a

Jew who did not forget that his grandmothers, grandfathers and aunt were taken into the gas chambers and “who were not better or worse than their non-Jewish neighbors. They never believed that they belonged to a chosen people and their death did not confer on them the status of chosen victims” (22). The commonality between all true victims in or of history was that “the executioners” of the Jews “were the ones who wanted to portray them as unique and outside history or who were motivated by the will to dominate. It is important to remind all those who refuse to see it that the uniqueness of the project of extermination was not the identity of its victims...but in the awful efficiency of their crimes”(23). Ultimately, as a professional historian, Sand admits that sometimes he contributes to the collective memory before adding “but I also feel somewhat uneasy that death and land have become the primary instructors and that they are now the unique common marker for the modern Jewish identity” (23). Sand did not miss the importance of the emerging power of the image against the word in ideological debates (45–46). I had a taste of the highly ethical and intellectual qualities of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem scholars in 1992 as a member of the first American Inter-religious delegation for a peace mission in the Middle East (58–60). While Israel is a vibrant debating society still creating its own melting pot, it is no surprise that one version of reading the Bible would lead to “Israeli territorial irredentism,” thus “reinforcing the intellectual official legitimacy of the latent fundamentalism that gnaws at secular Zionism in times of crisis”(63). An excellent analysis of the phenomenal emergence of *Gush Emunim* as a tool for a new phase of colonization is found here (67–74). But the reference to the *Lavon Affair* in 1961 is perplexing because it contradicts information given elsewhere in the text (208). It is commendable that Sand reserves some space in his book to “Jews from Arab lands” who could have been the most natural bridge for a genuine Arab-Israeli reconciliation and peace instead of being “excluded from official cultural discourse” and “often suffering professional disintellectualization, or forced to emigrate to other countries”(62, 84). Since the diplomatic formula “Land for Peace” is still part of the so-called peace process in 2014, it was good and useful that Sand reserved some important space for it by reminding us of the most recognized left-wing intellectuals, including Amos Oz, A. B. Yehoshua, and philosophy professors Shlomo Avineri and Yirmiyah Yovel, and many others who “agreed on the need for an immediate withdrawal from the administered territories more on the immorality of and ineffectiveness of the oppression of the other than from the conviction that these territories were not part of the legitimate

heritage of the Jewish nation” (76). This part of the analysis of an apparent dichotomy between *history* and *collective memory* is made more pertinent with the focus on the semantics regarding the name of the Land: Eretz Israel/The Land of Israel/Palaestina/Falastin. It is part of history, modern Western history, that David Ben Gurion called it “Madinat Israel” in the Declaration of Independence.

In conclusion, when Sand tackles the most critical issue of truth, he asserts: “Truth, contrary to the most widespread belief, is never found in the middle. It is always found where we least expect it, and we should never stop trying to uncover it” (132). As I see him, Sand may belong to that lineage of Jewish intellectuals who consciously or not follow the great Moses Maimonides who left us one the most eloquent definitions of truth: “The great evils that come about between the human individuals, who inflict them upon one another because of purpose...opinions, and beliefs...all of them derive from ignorance of the truth, I mean a privation of knowledge, for, through the cognition of the truth, enmity and hatred are removed and the inflicting of harm by people on one another is abolished” (Maimonides 1963: 440–41). The ultimate validity of Sand’s erudition and penetrating analytical skills will get their final answer from history in the near future because as long as Judeophobia is the only message of the enemy, the good intentions and good faith of the intellectuals will succumb to ideology.

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