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Shattering a 'national mythology'

By Ofri Ilani

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Of all the national heroes who have arisen from among the Jewish people over the generations, fate has not been kind to Dahia al-Kahina, a leader of the Berbers in the Aures Mountains. Although she was a proud Jewess, few Israelis have ever heard the name of this warrior-queen who, in the seventh century C.E., united a number of Berber tribes and pushed back the Muslim army that invaded North Africa. It is possible that the reason for this is that al-Kahina was the daughter of a Berber tribe that had converted to Judaism, apparently several generations before she was born, sometime around the 6th century C.E.

According to the Tel Aviv University historian, Prof. Shlomo Sand, author of "Matai ve'ech humtza ha'am hayehudi?" ("When and How the Jewish People Was Invented?"; Resling, in Hebrew), the queen's tribe and other local tribes that converted to Judaism are the main sources from which Spanish Jewry sprang. This claim that the Jews of North Africa originated in indigenous tribes that became Jewish - and not in communities exiled from Jerusalem - is just one element of the far-reaching argument set forth in Sand's new book.

In this work, the author attempts to prove that the Jews now living in Israel and other places in the world are not at all descendants of the ancient people who inhabited the Kingdom of Judea during the First and Second Temple period. Their origins, according to him, are in varied peoples that converted to Judaism during the course of history, in different corners of the Mediterranean Basin and the adjacent regions. Not only are the North African Jews for the most part descendants of pagans who converted to Judaism, but so are the Jews of Yemen (remnants of the Himyar Kingdom in the Arab Peninsula, who converted to Judaism in the fourth century) and the Ashkenazi Jews of Eastern Europe (refugees from the Kingdom of the Khazars, who converted in the eighth century).

Unlike other "new historians" who have tried to undermine the assumptions of Zionist historiography, Sand does not content himself with going back to 1948 or to the beginnings of Zionism, but rather goes back thousands of years. He tries to prove that the Jewish people never existed as a "nation-race" with a common origin, but rather is a colorful mix of groups that at various stages in history adopted the Jewish

religion. He argues that for a number of Zionist ideologues, the mythical perception of the Jews as an ancient people led to truly racist thinking: "There were times when if anyone argued that the Jews belong to a people that has gentile origins, he would be classified as an anti-Semite on the spot. Today, if anyone dares to suggest that those who are considered Jews in the world ... have never constituted and still do not constitute a people or a nation - he is immediately condemned as a hater of Israel."

According to Sand, the description of the Jews as a wandering and self-isolating nation of exiles, "who wandered across seas and continents, reached the ends of the earth and finally, with the advent of Zionism, made a U-turn and returned en masse to their orphaned homeland," is nothing but "national mythology." Like other national movements in Europe, which sought out a splendid Golden Age, through which they invented a heroic past - for example, classical Greece or the Teutonic tribes - to prove they have existed since the beginnings of history, "so, too, the first buds of Jewish nationalism blossomed in the direction of the strong light that has its source in the mythical Kingdom of David."

So when, in fact, was the Jewish people invented, in Sand's view? At a certain stage in the 19th century, intellectuals of Jewish origin in Germany, influenced by the folk character of German nationalism, took upon themselves the task of inventing a people "retrospectively," out of a thirst to create a modern Jewish people. From historian Heinrich Graetz on, Jewish historians began to draw the history of Judaism as the history of a nation that had been a kingdom, became a wandering people and ultimately turned around and went back to its birthplace.

Actually, most of your book does not deal with the invention of the Jewish people by modern Jewish nationalism, but rather with the question of where the Jews come from.

Sand: "My initial intention was to take certain kinds of modern historiographic materials and examine how they invented the 'figment' of the Jewish people. But when I began to confront the historiographic sources, I suddenly found contradictions. And then that urged me on: I started to work, without knowing where I would end up. I took primary sources and I tried to examine authors' references in the ancient period - what they wrote about conversion."

Sand, an expert on 20th-century history, has until now researched the intellectual history of modern France (in "Ha'intelektual, ha'emet vehakoah: miparashat dreyfus ve'ad milhemet hamifrats" - "Intellectuals, Truth and Power, From the Dreyfus Affair to the Gulf War"; Am Oved, in Hebrew). Unusually, for a professional historian, in his new book he deals with periods that he had never researched before, usually relying on studies that present unorthodox views of the origins of the Jews.

Experts on the history of the Jewish people say you are dealing with subjects about which you have no understanding and are basing yourself on works that you can't read in the original.

"It is true that I am an historian of France and Europe, and not of the ancient period. I knew that the moment I would start dealing with early periods like these, I would be exposed to scathing criticism by historians who specialize in those areas. But I said to myself that I can't stay just with modern historiographic material without examining the facts it describes. Had I not done this myself, it would have been necessary to have waited for an entire generation. Had I continued to deal with France, perhaps I would have been given chairs at the university and provincial glory. But I decided to relinquish the glory."

### **Inventing the Diaspora**

"After being forcibly exiled from their land, the people remained faithful to 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" - thus states the preamble to the Israeli Declaration of Independence. This is also the quotation that opens the third chapter of Sand's book, entitled "The Invention of the Diaspora." Sand argues that the Jewish people's exile from its land never happened.

"The supreme paradigm of exile was needed in order to construct a long-range memory in which an imagined and exiled nation-race was posited as the direct continuation of 'the people of the Bible' that preceded it," Sand explains. Under the influence of other historians who have dealt with the same issue in recent years, he argues that the exile of the Jewish people is originally a Christian myth that depicted that event as divine punishment imposed on the Jews for having rejected the Christian gospel.

"I started looking in research studies about the exile from the land - a constitutive event in Jewish history, almost like the Holocaust. But to my astonishment I discovered that it has no literature. The reason is that no one exiled the people of the country. The Romans did not exile peoples and they could not have done so even if they had wanted to. They did not have trains and trucks to deport entire populations. That kind of logistics did not exist until the 20th century. From this, in effect, the whole book was born: in the realization that Judaic society was not dispersed and was not exiled."

If the people was not exiled, are you saying that in fact the real descendants of the inhabitants of the Kingdom of Judah are the Palestinians?

"No population remains pure over a period of thousands of years. But the chances that the Palestinians are descendants of the ancient Judaic people are much greater than the chances that you or I are its descendents. The first Zionists, up until the Arab Revolt [1936-9], knew that there had been no exiling, and that the Palestinians were descended from the inhabitants of the land. They knew that farmers don't leave until they are expelled. Even Yitzhak Ben-Zvi, the second president of the State of Israel, wrote in 1929 that, 'the vast majority of

the peasant farmers do not have their origins in the Arab conquerors, but rather, before then, in the Jewish farmers who were numerous and a majority in the building of the land."

And how did millions of Jews appear around the Mediterranean Sea?

"The people did not spread, but the Jewish religion spread. Judaism was a converting religion. Contrary to popular opinion, in early Judaism there was a great thirst to convert others. The Hasmoneans were the first to begin to produce large numbers of Jews through mass conversion, under the influence of Hellenism. The conversions between the Hasmonean Revolt and Bar Kochba's rebellion are what prepared the ground for the subsequent, wide-spread dissemination of Christianity. After the victory of Christianity in the fourth century, the momentum of conversion was stopped in the Christian world, and there was a steep drop in the number of Jews. Presumably many of the Jews who appeared around the Mediterranean became Christians. But then Judaism started to permeate other regions - pagan regions, for example, such as Yemen and North Africa. Had Judaism not continued to advance at that stage and had it not continued to convert people in the pagan world, we would have remained a completely marginal religion, if we survived at all."

How did you come to the conclusion that the Jews of North Africa were originally Berbers who converted?

"I asked myself how such large Jewish communities appeared in Spain. And then I saw that Tariq ibn Ziyad, the supreme commander of the Muslims who conquered Spain, was a Berber, and most of his soldiers were Berbers. Dahia al-Kahina's Jewish Berber kingdom had been defeated only 15 years earlier. And the truth is there are a number of Christian sources that say many of the conquerors of Spain were Jewish converts. The deep-rooted source of the large Jewish community in Spain was those Berber soldiers who converted to Judaism."

Sand argues that the most crucial demographic addition to the Jewish population of the world came in the wake of the conversion of the kingdom of Khazaria - a huge empire that arose in the Middle Ages on the steppes along the Volga River, which at its height ruled over an area that stretched from the Georgia of today to Kiev. In the eighth century, the kings of the Khazars adopted the Jewish religion and made Hebrew the written language of the kingdom. From the 10th century the kingdom weakened; in the 13th century it was utterly defeated by Mongol invaders, and the fate of its Jewish inhabitants remains unclear.

Sand revives the hypothesis, which was already suggested by historians in the 19th and 20th centuries, according to which the Judaized Khazars constituted the main origins of the Jewish communities in Eastern Europe.

"At the beginning of the 20th century there is a tremendous concentration of Jews in Eastern Europe - three million Jews in Poland alone," he says. "The

Zionist historiography claims that their origins are in the earlier Jewish community in Germany, but they do not succeed in explaining how a small number of Jews who came from Mainz and Worms could have founded the Yiddish people of Eastern Europe. The Jews of Eastern Europe are a mixture of Khazars and Slavs who were pushed eastward."

### **'Degree of perversion'**

If the Jews of Eastern Europe did not come from Germany, why did they speak Yiddish, which is a Germanic language?

"The Jews were a class of people dependent on the German bourgeoisie in the East, and thus they adopted German words. Here I base myself on the research of linguist Paul Wechsler of Tel Aviv University, who has demonstrated that there is no etymological connection between the German Jewish language of the Middle Ages and Yiddish. As far back as 1828, the Ribal (Rabbi Isaac Ber Levinson) said that the ancient language of the Jews was not Yiddish. Even Ben Zion Dinur, the father of Israeli historiography, was not hesitant about describing the Khazars as the origin of the Jews in Eastern Europe, and describes Khazaria as 'the mother of the diasporas' in Eastern Europe. But more or less since 1967, anyone who talks about the Khazars as the ancestors of the Jews of Eastern Europe is considered naive and moonstruck."

Why do you think the idea of the Khazar origins is so threatening?

"It is clear that the fear is of an undermining of the historic right to the land. The revelation that the Jews are not from Judea would ostensibly knock the legitimacy for our being here out from under us. Since the beginning of the period of decolonization, settlers have no longer been able to say simply: 'We came, we won and now we are here' the way the Americans, the whites in South Africa and the Australians said. There is a very deep fear that doubt will be cast on our right to exist."

Is there no justification for this fear?

"No. I don't think that the historical myth of the exile and the wanderings is the source of the legitimization for me being here, and therefore I don't mind believing that I am Khazar in my origins. I am not afraid of the undermining of our existence, because I think that the character of the State of Israel undermines it in a much more serious way. What would constitute the basis for our existence here is not mythological historical right, but rather would be for us to start to establish an open society here of all Israeli citizens."

In effect you are saying that there is no such thing as a Jewish people.

"I don't recognize an international people. I recognize 'the Yiddish people' that existed in Eastern Europe, which though it is not a nation can be seen as a Yiddishist civilization with a modern popular culture. I think that Jewish

nationalism grew up in the context of this 'Yiddish people.' I also recognize the existence of an Israeli people, and do not deny its right to sovereignty. But Zionism and also Arab nationalism over the years are not prepared to recognize it.

"From the perspective of Zionism, this country does not belong to its citizens, but rather to the Jewish people. I recognize one definition of a nation: a group of people that wants to live in sovereignty over itself. But most of the Jews in the world have no desire to live in the State of Israel, even though nothing is preventing them from doing so. Therefore, they cannot be seen as a nation."

What is so dangerous about Jews imagining that they belong to one people? Why is this bad?

"In the Israeli discourse about roots there is a degree of perversion. This is an ethnocentric, biological, genetic discourse. But Israel has no existence as a Jewish state: If Israel does not develop and become an open, multicultural society we will have a Kosovo in the Galilee. The consciousness concerning the right to this place must be more flexible and varied, and if I have contributed with my book to the likelihood that I and my children will be able to live with the others here in this country in a more egalitarian situation - I will have done my bit.

"We must begin to work hard to transform our place into an Israeli republic where ethnic origin, as well as faith, will not be relevant in the eyes of the law. Anyone who is acquainted with the young elites of the Israeli Arab community can see that they will not agree to live in a country that declares it is not theirs. If I were a Palestinian I would rebel against a state like that, but even as an Israeli I am rebelling against it."

The question is whether for those conclusions you had to go as far as the Kingdom of the Khazars.

"I am not hiding the fact that it is very distressing for me to live in a society in which the nationalist principles that guide it are dangerous, and that this distress has served as a motive in my work. I am a citizen of this country, but I am also a historian and as a historian it is my duty to write history and examine texts. This is what I have done."

If the myth of Zionism is one of the Jewish people that returned to its land from exile, what will be the myth of the country you envision?

"To my mind, a myth about the future is better than introverted mythologies of the past. For the Americans, and today for the Europeans as well, what justifies the existence of the nation is a future promise of an open, progressive and prosperous society. The Israeli materials do exist, but it is necessary to add, for example, pan-Israeli holidays. To decrease the number of memorial days a bit and to add days that are dedicated to the future. But also, for example, to add

an hour in memory of the Nakba [literally, the "catastrophe" - the Palestinian term for what happened when Israel was established], between Memorial Day and Independence Day."

