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# Mr Shlomo Sand's profound and interesting question of Zionist Israel and the Jewish People

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Did the Exodus really happen? Was there ever another homeland? Does a historical claim through theology carry any weight? Are Jews who support Israel without exception hypocritical?

On the 26th November Charles University's Faculty of Arts hosted a lecture given by the charismatic Mr Shlomo Sand. Born in Austria, Mr Sand moved to live in Israel later and attained a BA in History from Tel Aviv University. During the 1980s Mr Sand lived in France, attempting to separate himself from Israel, but later he returned to teach at Tel Aviv University and has since had a number of books published. Some of his most recognised works include 'The Invention of the Jewish People' (2008) and 'How I Stopped Being a Jew' (2013). Mr Sand raised new questions and formed strong arguments in both of these books, which subsequently generated heated controversy due to their challenging of long



held beliefs and understandings. In the lecture, Mr Sand summarised some of the key points from his books.

Mr Sand's lecture begun with a thought provoking, and often forgotten point, that the stories of the Bible do not necessarily have any historically factual basis. This point was focused on the Exodus of the Jews from Judea. What Mr Sand, a History professor, claims is that there are no historical books which prove this exile. Instead, the 'evidence' is only shown in theological works and as a result, he is of the opinion that the exile of the Jews in the Bible did not actually occur. Rather than exile, Mr Sand's solidly argued belief explaining the decrease in the Jewish population of the area was religious conversion. Christianity simply appealed to more people as it was a 'friendlier' religion according to Mr Sand and later in the 7th century when Islam was born, many more Jews converted, thus a lower Jewish population. If it is true many Jews converted to Islam in the area of Judea, then today's Palestinians are highly likely to be the closest descendants to the Bible's Jews; an interesting thought. Judaism of course did not die out, as many Jews chose not to convert and many lived in kingdoms like the Hasmonean dynasty, renowned for its aggressive policies towards non-Jews, as well as general attempts of converting others to Judaism.

Another fascinating point Mr Sand raised was the Kingdom of Khazaria which existed within the area of modern day Russia and Ukraine. The Khazar royalty, nobility, and people converted to Judaism in the 8th century. Therefore, Khazaria was another (other than Judea), more recent, Jewish homeland. According to Mr Sand, until the 1960s Khazaria was used by Zionists to explain the high population of Jews in eastern Europe when compared to western Europe. Following the Six-Day War in 1967, the Khazars appeared to have disappeared from Zionist history as it would have undermined the Jewish historical claim to the land of today's Israel. This point was contested by some members of the audience, exhibiting the controversy surrounding the issue of historical claims.

Mr Sand finished his lecture by attempting to express the primary focus of his latest book's final chapter, which questioned the modernity and righteousness of Israel as a state. Mr Sand argued that, at least in theory, one of the key principles of a modern democracy is to care for each and every citizen equally; something he argues is clear that Israel does not do, due to the Jewish privileges there. It is important to note however that there is a strong argument that a plethora of modern, democratic states fail to do this. It can be conceded however that Israel actively fails to do this. Although arguably difficult to precisely pinpoint, there are definitely examples of forms of institutionalised racism by the Israeli state. In Israel, it is prohibited for people of different religions to get married, meaning that a Jew cannot marry a non-Jew. Although this law is general to all religions, it is possible to see that this somewhat targets non-Jews within Israel, as well as ensuring that the Jewish people in Israel prosper and numbers do not decrease. Also, through some research of my own, it became clear that the issue of race in Israel greatly affects education too. As recent as 2009, a report from the Hebrew University's School of Education showed that Arab Israeli students were provided with far less financial support than Jewish students. Also, the Follow-Up Committee for Arab Education claimed that the Israeli government spends a considerable average of \$1,100 per Jewish student compared to an average of only \$192 per year on each Arab student. Assuming that these statistics are credible, there lies a striking resemblance to the race issues seen in 1960s America. This leads directly onto Mr Sand's central question; how can non-Israeli Jews, whose families suffered oppression for centuries and even genocide, support a state which he argues shares some similar elements of those oppressive regimes, targeting non-Jews?

Whilst Mr Sand maintains that he does not agree that a religious claim gives any historical right to land, he still supports the existence of Israel as a state today. In a quote difficult to disagree with, he stated once that his support for Israel's existence is *"not because of historical right, but because of the fact that it exists today and any effort to destroy it will bring new tragedies"*. Whilst I find Mr Sand's argument regarding historical rights compelling, I remain on the fence regarding the issue of historical right due to my own lack of educated research on the topic. Of course, we must all hope that the most peaceful solution can be found regarding Israel and Palestine, which would require far more tolerance between all, regardless of race and/or religious affiliation. Therefore pragmatically further Israeli expansion cannot be supported, nor can the destruction of Israeli lands. Unfortunately, there is no simple faultless solution, and the topic remains a volatile one.

**Will Chamberlain** studies BA History at the University of Essex, UK, and is currently studying History in the Faculty of Arts at Charles University for an academic year. Originally from London, he enjoys travel, sport, history, and experiencing new cultures. As well as this, he enjoys writing and photography which led to his interest in journalism and blogging. He was keen to write for iForum to gain experience and improve his skills in journalism, as well as meet other aspiring writers.