

Legitimate Membership Rights: a response to

THE IDEA OF ISRAEL

A HISTORY OF POWER AND KNOWLEDGE

BY

ILAN PAPPE

Borrowing from WH Auden's set of possible literary judgments: *'This is a good book and I like it.'*

I just wanted to make that clear from the start.

Who might consider it to be (another of Auden's categories) *'A bad book and I don't like it'?*

The answer to that question is predictable but depressing. Not only does the list include demagogic deceivers such as Prime Minister Netanyahu, repulsive racists such as Foreign Minister Lieberman and sophisticated sophists such as President Peres but also includes highly qualified professional historians, archaeologists, journalists, artists and writers. They all collude in and depend upon (they live upon) acceptance and promotion of myth, falsification and what we have learned to call 'spin'. In Israel's case we are talking about Olympic standard spin, though Pappé suggests that increasing the spin may be decreasing its effectiveness.

This is an important history book about history and, as you may have gathered, this is not going to be a cold-blooded 'response', a word I have chosen in preference to 'review' because, though I shall try, I know that I won't do it justice and I really do want to show something of what the book has sparked in me.

The book is not a polemic, though Pappé's values are clear on every page. They are human values and they are also the values of a professional historian who is able to take the reader on a complex journey of false dawns and cul-de-sacs, progress and regression, hope and despair, clarity and obfuscation.

He clarifies for me what I thought I knew something about: Zionism. He explains Anti Zionism, Post Zionism, Classical Zionism and Neo Zionism and the very many shades and shifts between all the categories as they form, deform and re-form. The history of Zionism is the history of a kaleidoscope. The patterns and colours change. They have to because every time serious scholars or human rights activists or independently minded politicians question the official national narrative about, for example, 1948 or the massacre and ill-treatment of indigenous people it must be re-formulated and re-stated in order to reinforce the many myths that sustain it. I also sometimes picture Zionists as Tom and

Jerry who, having run off a cliff, don't fall. If you don't look down and run even faster you can convince yourself that you are on solid ground. But you are not.

I once asked a prominent Israeli journalist about government censorship. That, I was told, was not the problem: self-censorship is the problem. Journalists will report an 'alleged' rape in Tel Aviv but when Palestinians are shot they are automatically referred to as 'terrorists'. The official national narrative is deeply embedded and well nourished.

Ilan Pappé takes us through the historiography of Israel: how its history has been constructed and presented, altered and re-altered. There is a lot of evidence to manage, including film, theatre, journalism and educational policy. In his book we are not simply looking at historians and their writings. It would be so easy to become lost in the maze or to be crushed under the weight. He is neither lost nor crushed and neither are his readers who he treats with respect, as you would expect of a serious historian.

I chose *Legitimate Membership Rights* as the title of my response to the book because I could not avoid the question: 'How can you keep your historian's union membership card if you close your mind to awkward, disturbing and challenging evidence?' I was also thinking of the desperate Zionist obsession with maintaining the legitimacy of Israel as home to the 'true' heirs to the land. They desire to be counted among the numbers of nations, despite their unenthusiastic membership of the United Nations.

When Deborah Lipstadt accused David Irving of being a Holocaust denier he sued her for libel. Richard Evans was the expert witness for the defence. The Holocaust was not, Evans pointed out, on trial. Had it been Irving would have been able to throw lots of dust in the face of the court in the form of carefully chosen and craftily presented evidence of dubious provenance, with a misplaced reference here and an unclear citation there and lots of obscure sources. Unfortunately for him, Irving reckoned without the forensic ability of Evans and his team to reveal the misrepresentation of evidence. What was really on trial, Evans pointed out, was the right of Irving to be called an historian. Irving lost.

Why, I wonder, are not certain Israeli historians on trial for their right to be called historians? It makes you wonder about the concept of peer review.

Pappé acknowledges that historians have prisms through which they look at the past. I suppose that many of us in the UK were taught at school to use a Whig prism and to associate a word such as 'reform' with the abolition of slavery and the extension of the franchise and more such. This makes it difficult to stomach today the appropriation of the word by people such as Michael Gove as he *deforms* the school system in England. So why complain if highly qualified and highly placed Israeli historians and transmitters of culture use a Zionist prism?

We are not talking about disputable ideas and interpretations of events. We are not even talking about using different perspectives. We are confronted by historians, political scientists, sociologists, journalists, writers, artists,

schoolteachers, academics, documentary makers, soldiers, politicians, an entire cultural machine that rests its central argument upon an assumption, driven mostly by former European Ashkenazi Jews of a particular nationalistic cast of mind, that the descendants of people who left hundreds of, even more than a thousand, years before a single Roman soldier set foot in the place, are entitled to 'return' to a land from which the Romans are supposed to have expelled them but didn't.

This false assumption has led to the cultural belittlement of Sephardi and Mizrahi Jews who were forced to assimilate into the Zionist vision of what it is to be a Jew, though often condemned to wear a metaphorical label signifying their inferiority. What was once a flourishing and creative Yiddish culture was also homogenised. Maybe the Ethiopian Jews were grateful to be brought to Israel; but, as Nurit Peled-Elhanan has pointed out, they have not been treated well. And as for the Jews of Roman and post Roman times, there has never been anything down for them. Invaded by the Arabs in the 600s, they have seen Crusaders and Turks come and go; Allenby and Lawrence of Arabia also came and went; and France and Britain carved up the Middle East. They have adapted their language and their place names and adopted religions in accordance with whoever was in charge. It is what happens when you are overpowered. Indigenous British (Welsh) people still count in Latin because of the Roman occupation.

And now, because it suits them to control the labelling of a people they wish to perceive as 'others', Israel has classified them as Arabs. Defend the original Semitic people and Zionists will call you anti-Semitic.

But why should it matter who is the more Semitic and what rights that grants a group of people, even an artificially moulded one? It is humanity that is at stake.

1948 saw Zionism's favourite United Nations Resolution: the one that established Israel as a State. That resolution was rather like a piece of enabling legislation: once passed it enabled Israel not only to flex its muscles but also to create a national narrative that suppressed the narrative of the indigenous people to the extent that now it barely registers. The countries that voted for that UN Resolution were granting licence to steal land, demolish villages (almost 500 hundred of them, so far), expel, torture, falsely imprison and brutalise millions of people; and helping to legitimise those that claim justification for all of this by means of a false and inhuman story constructed and promoted by people who claim membership of the scholars' union.

That particular UN Resolution seems also to have been regarded by Zionist Israel as empowering it to disregard any further UN Resolutions that they did not like.

For pro Zionists of all persuasions 1948 is a crucial foundation belief. Little Israel, surrounded by vast hostile Arab forces, gallantly fights them off and celebrates by establishing 'the only democracy in the Middle East'. The phrase 'suspend disbelief' comes to mind. It ought to be the sub title of every Israeli school history textbook. As you would expect, Pappé deals with the artfulness of

the official Israeli presentation of 1948. He does this by simply being an historian; you know, someone who asks critical questions and interrogates evidence as a professional historian is supposed to. Strange to say, other Israeli historians, most notably Benny Morris, have also exposed what really happened in 1948. Unfortunately, Morris's meta-narrative is one that seeks to justify massacre and expulsion. And many of those others have, like recanting apostates, returned to 'mother church' later in life.

A particular device is now deployed to deal with the increasingly self-evident current bad behaviour of Israel as an occupying power. It is the drawing of a line under pre 1967 Israeli history in order to concentrate the intellectual power of historians and professional social sense-makers upon the more than forty years since then. This has the effect of removing pre-1967 Israel from criticism and places it in an unassailable archive that we might almost label, 'A Golden Age'. The archive is also a foundation: a reference point. Everything that is wrong today can be attributed to mistakes made since 1967. In other words, any negotiations with Palestinians are now based upon placing the history of 1948-1967 Israel in a secure and well-guarded intellectual vault.

As a result, Neo Zionist historians can now deploy all of their great professional powers within a comfortingly framed narrative. There is licence to criticise current government policy post 1967 because the foundations are considered solid and beyond criticism. 'No going back' is now the slogan of all Israeli governments. So, if they cannot contemplate going back or revising their official version of history, what, we are entitled to ask, might the future look like? In fact, we really *must* ask this question because when you base your future upon a falsified past that you also require others to accept the stakes become huge.

For now I see three forces at work. They can be placed in a hierarchy of complexity. The first is the force characterised by expansion and repression. In order to expand Country A so that it displaces Country B you must kill lots of people, chase out lots of people and subjugate the people who remain. This is really a very straightforward force. It demands only low-grade discussions about effective methods and so on. The biggest problem is one of conscience but once massacres and land thefts are placed within a narrative of what had to happen for destiny to be fulfilled qualms turn into self-righteousness.

The second force is the desire for peace. But given the momentum of the first force this is beginning to look like the peace spoken of by a British chief and reported by Tacitus: 'ubi solitudinem faciunt pace appellant' or, 'they have created desolation and called it peace'.

Of course it won't be desolation for Israelis. Walk around, say, the beautifully landscaped Tel Aviv University or the nearby Eretz (land of) Israel Museum and Hayarkon Park where so many overseas celebrities come to perform in order to further legitimise Israel: you will be impressed. The river flows by, the trees are nicely planted and the grass is cared for. Yitzhak Rabin and Shimon Peres used to live as neighbours not too far away. Of course, if you read Shlomo Sand's book *The Invention of the Land of Israel*, you will discover that this all came at a cost to the Palestinian villagers who were displaced to enable it: landscaped

gardening for one group at the expense of desolation for another group. Possibly, and perhaps, this force might, from time to time, disturb some consciences. If, however, you look at it as a great Israeli achievement that demonstrates the superiority of modern civilisation over backward 'natives' who knew nothing about air conditioning or the importance of owning the latest BMW your conscience will be quietened.

The third force might best be described as a clash of opposites and the one begets the other. What this clash might generate seems to me to be the question of the moment. Ilan Pappé ends his book by writing about 'Brand Israel'. To open a British newspaper the day after some criticism of Israel you will often find a letter rebutting what was said. Sometimes the letter will have been carefully crafted in the embassy and sometimes it will bear an address in Israel. The Palestinian public relations effort is puny by comparison. Until I read Pappé, however, I had not realised the extent of the effort to brand and re-brand Israel.

TripAdvisor has recently been sending out lovely sunny pictures of modern, clean, seaside apartments in Israel facing the setting sun and more. Even if you do not get on a plane to go to Israel to stay in one of those apartments you will have registered that this is what Israel is like. It is what the branders want you to see and remember. Just as in, say, 1938 elegant Berlin café society the concentration camps are out of sight and out of mind.

Israel's technology is world class and another means of creating a positive, modern image at odds with the image of 'primitive' Palestinians. And both images are very well controlled by Israel. It dominates the discourse. Israel modern: Palestinians primitive. The expectation is that we will wish to associate ourselves with an image that shouts 'modern'.

The internationally recognised capital of Israel is Tel Aviv but, under constant pressure, the BBC dare not say that any more so it refers to it as 'Israel's commercial capital'. Embassies are always in capital cities. Walk along Hayarkon Street in Tel Aviv from the Jaffa end and the first embassy you will encounter is the embassy of the USA (a brutal fortress). The next will be the elegant fortress of France, almost opposite what was once the headquarters of the Israel Labour Party (now spelled Labor and moved to a more rightwing part of town) and a few hundred yards later you come to the low key British embassy.

Highly professional branders and re-branders of Israel create the conditions in which supposedly fearless journalists like the BBC's Jeremy Bowen must use weasel words. Reporting the death of Ariel Sharon Bowen called him 'controversial'. What is 'controversial' about a mass murderer, except that he became Prime Minister of Israel and so must be treated with kid gloves?

The purpose of 'Brand Israel' is to avoid becoming trapped in the arguments about legitimacy and instead to sell the country as a desirable product. Legitimacy is now dependent upon marketing. I cannot help feeling that this was not a good move by Zionist Israel. They have chosen to fight image with image.

My guess is that this decision will work to their advantage only for a while. There is nothing that has greater impact in the image world than a sudden collapse of credibility.

Juxtapose the image of a luxury apartment facing the Mediterranean with the shooting of a boy gathering food from land owned by his family or the forceful eviction of a very old Palestinian lady by ruthless Israeli settlers while the army stands by to support the settlers; how might this help promote Brand Israel?

Ilan Pappé has doubts about the effectiveness of this branding and clearly it raises the question of why it is necessary and what it is trying to counter. It clashes with the growing ability of charities, human rights organisations and ordinary people to not only campaign but also to illustrate their campaigns with text and pictures and films via electronic social networking sites that have a world-wide instant reach.

In the days when pressure was put upon apartheid South Africa it was via a few demonstrations that might be reported for a few days. To reach a friend thousands of miles away people wrote letters, put them in envelopes, addressed them, stamped them, posted them in letterboxes and hoped they would not take too long to arrive. Then they waited for a reply. It is not like that now.

As for influential voices we have Desmond Tutu and Jimmy Carter and a few others. What we do not have is a President of the United States with the foresight and courage to emulate Harold Macmillan's 'Wind of Change' speech to the South African Parliament. Can you imagine Obama delivering such a speech to the Knesset? His defenders could, no doubt, assemble all sorts of short-term political/diplomatic reasons why he could not do so. The truth, for me, is a lack of moral courage. Obama is black. Does he not know that in Zionist Israel to be black is to be regarded as inferior? Is he a 'brother'? The continuation of Guantanamo Bay is one answer to that question: it is a form of racism in which Obama is willing to collude.

Re-branding and advertising campaigns combined with very public approval from world famous bands and singers, the promotion overseas of Israeli dance troupes and orchestras and the placing of pressure upon foreign politicians and media may be overwhelmed by the messaging powers of electronic media. Certainly Zionist Israel has enormous power to shape perceptions of events and to create fear among the politicians of the USA that their votes are at risk but once the biggest kid in the playground ceases to be quite such best mates with the smallest bully where will Israel be?

In my view, although the release into political life of Nelson Mandela is usually seen as a benefit to black South Africans it actually saved white South Africans. In what kind of a situation would they be today if Mandela had not returned to political life? I see no F.W. de Klerk in Israel. Tzipi Livni is sometimes presented as an increasingly pragmatically disposed politician but can you see her becoming best mates with Marwan Barghouti? If the Zionists that control political, historical, cultural and educational discourse in Israel (and overseas) today have decided that the only way forward is expansion and repression then,

though it may sound trite, things will become far worse before they get better; if they ever do get better. For now the Non, Anti and Post Zionist voices are muted.

The present government of Israel is not offering to go back to its pre 1967 borders to enable a two state solution; it has no intention of allowing Palestinians to return to land from which they were expelled; and it dare not risk a questioning of the basis upon which it was established in 1948 because that would shatter the founding myth and amount to de-legitimisation.

Miko Peled wants a single state. Shlomo Sand has suggested that a two-state solution is still possible. We can envisage both solutions. What is difficult to work out, however, is the vision of those Israeli politicians that are currently in power. Clearly they are incapable of going back but do they think they can go on forever with their policy of sabotaging negotiations? Do they have a plan that means more than being re-elected?

I believe that they have unleashed forces of racist religiosity that they are increasingly finding extremely difficult to control. We might like to think that rational argument is the way forward. How do you argue with someone who believes that their power to seize the land of 'others' and to kill, torture and dispossess them is all part of a contract with a supernatural being?

We could, and many politicians and commentators do, become enmeshed in so many pointless arguments, so many tussles over who has the right to call who names in the political playground while red herrings such as Iranian potential nuclear weapons capability are dragged across the diplomatic field so that politicians and journalists follow a false scent while forgetting the substantive issue.

Zionism is like a hot air balloon with lots of holes in it but kept aloft because so many people continue to blow yet more hot air into it. In the name of 'progress' and 'modernity' and 'history', concepts that Zionists would like to hitch to their wagon, we are witnesses to a huge crime against humanity itself.

It is essential to take scholarship seriously and at times that means undertaking considerable research some of it seeming, at least at the time, to be fruitless or discomfiting. But that is not the same as misusing the skills of scholarship in the service of inhumanity. Historians that deploy their considerable skills in order to excuse and explain away the massacre, expulsion and subjugation of fellow human beings simply because their history and their very existence messes up a chosen narrative are not worthy of the name.

Himmler commissioned considerable research from some highly qualified and skilled historians in order to legitimise his chosen Aryan narrative. It did not work. Some people ought to reflect upon that.

Quite possibly the UK shall have a Labour government in 2015. I shall certainly vote for it. If so it shall, I fear, be led by someone who lacks the intellectual and moral capacity to say to Israel anything that it does not wish to hear or has not

long ago consigned to the dustbin of history. His comments upon settlements, every single one of which is illegal, amount to no more than a light slap on the wrist.

What is the possibility of putting Ed Miliband into a room with, say, Nurit Peled-Elhanan and her brother Miko Peled? Their mother lives near what was Dier Yassin and they can tell him about the Yad Veshem guide who was sacked for telling visitors to that Holocaust Museum that it overlooks the site of a Zionist massacre of innocent Palestinians.

How, I wonder, would Miliband and Obama (please notice that I do not include Tony Blair who we must write off as any kind of moral force) engage with Musheir El-Farra, author of *GAZA, when the sky rained white fire*? I defy anyone who is not inhuman to read that book without weeping in sorrow and anger. OK, OK, OK, politicians ought to be able to do their jobs with the emotional temperature turned down a bit. But I cannot respect a politician (or historian) who makes excuses for deliberate inhumanity.

We are now back to Pappé's prisms. Might we call them conceptual frameworks; or, perhaps, assumptions? They are certainly value positions. I hope I have not given the impression that I believe cold bloodedness to be the chief requirement for being accepted as a professional historian. I do not. And, although I believe objectivity to be highly desirable, the best we can do most of the time is high quality subjectivity. That entails being as fair as possible to the reader and trying not to hide value positions. It also means that those value positions become open to criticism, especially if there is an attempt to conceal or misrepresent them.

You might shudder with horror when Benny Morris in his book *1948* provides us with the detail of what happened at Dier Yassin. But that is what an historian is supposed to do. You might recoil from his judgment that its true significance was its contribution to what he just about refrains from labelling as 'desirable ethnic cleansing' and not what I think most of us would see as a massacre demonstrating the inhuman depths to which people could fall in the name of Zionism. You might credit him with, at least, a degree of honesty for being clear about his values. But what, I think, ought to get him chucked out of the historians' union is the sneakiness with which he insinuates his views in order to justify inhumanity together with the casualness with which he asserts the expulsion of Jews by Rome. He needs to refer to the 'expulsion' because it is the basic Zionist reference point but he must know that no serious historian believes it to have happened. He, therefore, buries the reference, in the first page of his book, in a sentence about the Roman naming of the land.

Here is Tom Segev on Morris.

<http://www.richardsilverstein.com/2010/07/19/tom-segev-reviews-benny-morris-new-book-1948/>

Does Israel wish to be Jewish or Zionist? It seems to have little wish as yet to de-exceptionalise being Jewish and become inclusively Humanist. Shall the

Zionist prism pervert Judaism into Fascism? By what kind of standard of humanity does it wish to be judged?

One day Tom and Jerry will look down. Then they will fall. Who shall be there to catch them?

Some further reading

Richard Evans (1998), *In Defence of History*.

This is a good book to go to be reminded that the work of historians can and should be taken seriously. If you wish to join the fellowship of historians you would be advised to read it. The title Evans has chosen echoes Bernard Crick's book of 1962, *In Defence of Politics*, in which, rather more sketchily, Crick reminds us that politics is about public discussion of public values.

Nurit Peled-Elhanen (2012), *Palestine in Israeli School Books, ideology and propaganda in education*.

Here is the academically unassailable evidence that Israeli schoolbooks are not designed to encourage enquiry or critical reflection outside an officially approved narrative and perceptions of self and of others. That narrative and those perceptions are dehumanising. For a review of the book go to <http://www.criticalprofessionallearning.co.uk/assets/webNurit.pdf>

Shlomo Sand (2009), *The Invention of the Jewish People* and (2013) *The Invention of the Land of Israel*.

Sand is both an Israeli academic and a normaliser or a de-exceptionaliser. For him one of the problems of Israel is the demand of Zionism that Jews are to be treated as an exceptional people. Surprisingly for a myth-buster Sand's books have sold very well in Israel. Needless to say, he has been attacked and given that most famous of labels: a 'self-hating Jew'. What he has to say shakes foundations. For some people it must be very difficult to read that you are descended from mixed marriages and religious converts, that you are not 'returning' or that your relationship to the land has been invented: that, in fact, you are not as special as you thought you were and should not expect others to take you at your own valuation.

Miko Peled (2012), *The General's Son, journey of an Israeli in Palestine*.

Miko Peled is an example for other Israeli's to follow. On his journey he discovers so much about himself, the history that he had been taught and, for me most tellingly, the normality and humanity of the people that the Zionist discourse has identified as inferior 'others'. Here is the last paragraph of my review of his book.

A final thought: his mother in her garden growing plants: not a house or a garden stolen from a Palestinian family (she had the chance of that but utterly

rejected it as immoral) but close to what was the village of Dier Yassin where the Palestinian inhabitants were massacred in 1948. I think of the growth of her plants as I think of the growth of the values that her children are propagating.

To read the full review, please click here:

http://www.criticalprofessionallearning.co.uk/assets/CliffWeb_General's_Son.pdf

There are so many books and articles and films and poems and songs and paintings to mention. Brave journalists and academics, Jewish and Palestinian, fight against the force field erected against reason and humanity. How to penetrate the force field? Here is another book that should help.

Musheir El-Farra (2012), *GAZA, when the sky rained white fire.*

How casual, how ordinary, to sit in a tank, take aim at an ambulance, shoot at and destroy it and the people inside; and it is a matter of a few moments to order a family out of their house so that it becomes easier to machine-gun them: mothers rushing too late to protect with their own bodies young children and babies; fathers and uncles forming human shields round the young and the old so that the bullets would hit them first: an automatic response from human beings. In those moments race, religion or political affiliation mean very little. Humanity, however, means everything; except, of course, to those that have chosen to disregard it.

I wonder how the self-styled 'New Historian' Benny Morris would respond to this book detailing the stories of families, sometimes of three or four generations sitting down to eat before the unexpected bombs fall; the survivors identifying the dead from fragments of flesh; or the mother, so proud of her skill as a seamstress making clothes for the family, grabbing her needle and thread to stitch up the bullet holes in her son's chest because the Israeli army won't allow an ambulance to approach. She stopped the bleeding for a while but then it seeped through the stitches and he died in her arms. After that would you pick up your needle to mend the slightest tear or sew on a button?

Morris is not one to hide horror but he justifies it and takes the view that while Israel has made mistakes mostly the fault lies with the 'others': humanity should surrender to inhumanity because of the Zionist destiny.

Personal note.

I have absolutely no pretensions to be an academic contender in the field of historical scholarship. I also totally realise that my detailed knowledge is unlikely to enable me to engage in dispute with the likes of Benny Morris about what happened and when. But I reckon that he and his ilk have never even tried a prism called 'humanity'. They should.

To engage critically with this article you may find it useful to look at **Page 61** of [The Values of New Labour](#)

Cliff Jones April 2014

