

The myth of the Jewish exile from the land of Israel: a demonstration of irenic scholarship.

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The Myth of the Jewish Exile from the Land of Israel: A Demonstration of Irenic Scholarship

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

The Myth of the Jewish Exile from the Land of Israel

A Demonstration of Irenic Scholarship

Israel J. Yuval (bio)

More than that of any other nation, Jewish identity is based on the *imaginaire* of a collective memory rather than on a common territory. I intend to examine here the sources of one myth that has had critical influence on the establishment of Jewish collective memory and modern Israeli identity. In doing so, I find myself treading a thin line. On the one hand, I am a Zionist loyal to awareness of the need for the existence of the State of Israel. On the other hand, I am deeply troubled by the price paid by the Palestinians for the fulfillment of this dream. Like many others, I desperately seek a fair solution that will minimize the pain and suffering for both sides.

I am presenting these remarks out of recognition that the historian—especially a historian who deals with his own culture—cannot evade the responsibility of clarifying the political, moral, and social significance of his research. I belong to the generation of Israeli historians who turned their back on Zionist historiography, which was characterized by the dominance of grand national narratives. My generation has preferred to cover itself in the warm, protective blanket of "professional history," of scholarship free of ideological bias; and rather than **[End Page 16]** grand national narrative, we have preferred to deal with a multitude of smaller narratives. However, this newer approach does not mean that the professional study of history has ceased to serve political goals. Even as a "profession," history is still a tool that advances national and particularistic agendas, and these do not provide the cultural and mental equipment needed for the establishment of an era of reconciliation and peace. For that reason, I prefer to assign another task to historical studies: to construct histories that educate toward self-criticism and the tolerance of conflicting national narratives.

The position that I would like to propose here is not post-Zionist. I do not wish to undermine the Zionist national narrative or to weaken it. However, I do wish to add a dimension of self-awareness to it, so that it will be more critical, more nuanced, more balanced. In this way, historiography can take an important step forward. In the past two

hundred years, historical studies mainly have helped to shape national consciousness and national particularism—one may add national egotism. Historical studies must undergo a corrective transformation and serve to foster understanding among nations, rather than hatred. Thus, after shifting from monophonic national history to professional history, we should continue now into a new phase of polyphonic history. The study of history should cease to serve those who foment conflicts and become instead an instrument of reconciliation, understanding, and tolerance.

In order to achieve that aim, the change I am describing must take place in every rival camp. Therefore, I proposed to the organizers of this workshop that they bring an Israeli historian who takes a critical approach toward the historical narratives of Zionist nationalism together with a Palestinian historian who adopts a similar approach toward the founding narratives of Palestinian nationalism. Unfortunately, my wish could not be realized. Nevertheless, I am here, prepared to speak, because I have come to the conclusion that the duty of self-criticism is incumbent on the conqueror more than on the conquered. I hope that these remarks will foster parallel responses. It would be very disappointing if the only result of this internal Jewish criticism were the reinforcement of criticism from outside.

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The myth I will examine is that of the exile of the Jews from their land as a result of the destruction of the Second Temple, and I will trace its vicissitudes and history. This myth is very common not only in Israel but also in the West. The national anthem of the State of Israel declares that the hope to live as a free nation in the Land of Israel is 2,000 years old. Belief that the establishment of the State of Israel put an end to a two-millennium exile is so widely shared that, in the first...

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