

25.25x36.91	1	15	עמוד	the jerusalem post - front	14/05/2014	42425231-3
ד"ר זורון ב - 84920						

Historic blindness

Seth Frantzman: Why let 'iNakba' tell Israel's story?



Historic blindness: Why let 'iNakba' tell Israel's story?



TERRA INCOGNITA
• By SETH J. FRANTZMAN

It is the season of rival narratives in Israel; when Arabs commemorate 'Nakba Day' at the same time Jews celebrate independence. Actually there are two Nakba days, one commemorated alongside Independence Day on the Hebrew date so as to negate Israel's celebration, and another on May 15.

This year the NGO Zochrot, an organization that supports the "decolonization" of Israel, the "physical return of refugees," and promotes "Israeli Jewish society's acknowledgment of and accountability for the ongoing injustices of the Nakba" launched an application for smartphones, called iNakba. It was unveiled purposely in the lead-up to Independence Day. Zochrot notes that the app "allows users to locate the Palestinian localities destroyed in the Nakba since 1948 and learn about them... it is interactive and allows users to add pictures of destroyed localities as well as to share comments and follow updates."

Many of those who support Israel, and even many of those critical of Israeli actions, find this objectionable. We rightly object to the negation of Independence Day and find the insinuation that Israel must be "decolonized" through refugee return - which would mean the large-scale expulsion of Jews - fascistic. Particularly galling is the revelation that this organization is supported, according to NGO Monitor and some of its own materials, by such organizations as Oxfam, Finnish Church Aid, Christian Aid, the Mennonite Central Committee and the American Friends Service Committee. In a sense Christian organizations are bankrolling "education" in service of the return of Palestinians, which is highly problematic since the end result would likely be the mass expulsion of Jews, many of whom came to Israel long after 1948, from their homes.

The objectionable nature of the goal, however, makes people willfully blind to other side of the coin. The logic is that since we don't like the kind of people who talk about "Nakba," therefore anything to do with the Nakba must be illegitimate. An article at the website Mekomit illustrates the point. Yael Marom, a member of the moshav Aseret near Gadera, writes that she recalls growing up and seeing an old building with three domes near the community. She describes playing games of hide and seek near the old building, but that "we knew it was forbidden to know what the story was with the sheikh's tomb behind the house." The tomb was actually the reputed grave of the Prophet Seth. Its name in Arabic was "Maqam Nabi Seth" and the Arab village Bashshit that had been there likely took its name from the tomb; the name basically means the "House of Seth." (I must admit a certain warmth for this place of my namesake.)

It is interesting that Seth is not actually mentioned in the Koran. So why did the Arabs call this place the "House



PEOPLE GATHER at Deir Sheikh near Nes Harim (top, right); the ruins of Nabi Rubin near Palmachim (above) and the old mill near Ras Ali in the Galilee. (Courtesy)

of Seth" (typical site name in the coastal plain consisted of the "house of" construction, for example Beit Shemesh, Beit Guvrin)? The traditional Islam of the villagers regarded "Seth" as an Islamic prophet in the line of Adam.

The full archaeological history of the tomb is irrelevant; some of the holy "sheikh tombs" one finds were built by the Romans as mausoleums, such as the tomb next to Elad. But if one is afraid of hearing "Nakba," they discard the tomb as well, because of a fear that somehow an interest in it might open a Pandora's box that leads to undermining the state.

The landscape of Israel is dotted by thousands of buildings like that, and their quiet, disconcerting presence leads to a compulsion to declare "the Nakba is a lie." It is correct to see a dissonance in trying to mesh together the Palestinian and Israeli narratives, but it is not logical to simply pretend therefore that there was never a large Arab community in Ottoman Palestine, and have an irrational fear of stone buildings that served that community.

The decision to ignore the pre-1948 Arab community surrenders the field to Zochrot and iNakba. Why is it that despite all the hi-tech savvy in Israel, there actually is not an Israeli equivalent to iNakba for travelers? If you are

going on a hike the best resource you can find is Amudan, a website and app that reproduces the 1:50,000 map of the country. That is nice for seasoned hikers and the crowdsourcing has resulted in many sites being identified on the map, but it isn't very user friendly.

During research I conducted with Doron Bar we located hundreds of sheikhs' tombs across the country, many of which are in varying states of disrepair. There are over a dozen Mamluk- or Ottoman-era Khans that can be visited. There are several abandoned churches in the Galilee at Ma'alul and Baram. That is just scratching the surface. There are dozens of well-houses ("Batei Be'er") that are in various states of decay in the Tel Aviv area. There are over 50 mills from the Ottoman period that dot the landscape. It is a veritable treasure-trove of old buildings, but instead of finding a way to incorporate their history into Israel, the feeling that they are too proximate to the period before the War of Independence leaves them swallowed up in a Palestinian narrative of suffering that relates them only to the abandoned Palestinian villages (of which there were over 400).

It has been 66 years since the 1948 war. How many more years must go by before a visitor to Nabi Rubin, near Palmachim, will be greeted by a plaque explaining the history of the famous tomb, that once played host to a Beduin market attended by thousands in the 1930s? How many years before Sidna Ali and the fort at Majdal Yaba (next to Rosh Ha'ayin), or the mills along the Yarkon River, are not only sites of better preservation but also places tourists want to visit? And what about the former Armenian village of Sheikh Breik next to Atlit?

Israeli history could be improved and enriched by incorporating this history. The political impasse, especially among some on the Left who are residents of the kibbutzim whose lands now incorporate some of these sites, is not helpful. It has gone past being a question of denial or political expedience as it was in the 1950s.

