

An Analysis of “The Bride is Beautiful but she is Married to another Man” Tales

by [Shai Afsai](#) (January 2025)



La Mariée (Marc Chagall, 1912)

The ubiquity of “The bride is beautiful, but she is married to another man” stories, which will be discussed here, presents a troubling illustration of the shoddiness found in Middle Eastern studies and of how scholars, journalists, and filmmakers regularly dispense with accuracy and evidentiary standards when dealing with Jewish, Zionist, and Israeli history. Professionalism is often intentionally put aside to advance political agendas and as part of efforts to delegitimize the Jewish state, and this approach has become so entrenched that fictions are relied upon even when documented events could be made to serve such purposes instead.

In the year and three months that have followed Hamas and other Palestinian terror organizations and supporters’ October 7th, 2023 invasion of Israel, killing of soldiers, slaughter of civilians, sexual assault and rape of women, and abduction of over two hundred and fifty Israeli and foreign nationals, including dozens of children and babies, renewed attention has been given to how dismally the Arab-Israeli conflict is covered in much of the international media. The repeated assertion that the Israeli military bombed Gaza’s al-Ahli Hospital on October 17th, 2023 during Iron Swords, its subsequent war to destroy Hamas’ military and governance capabilities, and that at least five hundred Palestinian civilians died that day as a result, has been but one glaring example of a pattern. The BBC’s [Jeremy Bowen](#), for instance, declared on air that the hospital had been “destroyed” and the “building was flattened.” Likewise, the BBC’s [Jon Donnison](#) declared on air that an explosion “of that scale” and with so many casualties could only have been caused by “an Israeli airstrike—or several airstrikes.” It soon became known that the hospital building was never bombed, that there was no evidence of an Israeli strike in the immediate vicinity, and that the explosion in an adjacent parking lot was caused by a Palestinian-fired rocket aimed at Israel’s civilian

population—at which point most media outrage about any deaths and injuries evaporated.

Such misinformation evokes the way April 2002's Battle of Jenin was reported on during Israel's Operation Defensive Shield, with repeated assertions then of a massacre leaving at least five hundred and as many as several thousand Palestinian civilians dead from that fighting. It [soon emerged](#) that about fifty Palestinians (at least half of whom were combatants) and twenty-three Israeli soldiers were killed in the battle. Nevertheless, media outlets like [Middle East Monitor](#)— whose online "About Us" page begins with the statement that "The use or misuse of information is central to the conflict in the Middle East" —have continued to depict the battle as an Israeli "killing spree" and "massacre." Remarkably, the *Forward*, whose "About" page states that it "delivers incisive coverage of the issues, ideas and institutions that matter to American Jews," has also embraced this libel. In a February 1, 2023 article, [Mira Fox](#) praised Mohammed Bakri's 2003 propaganda film *Jenin, Jenin*, echoed its debunked depiction of the battle as a "massacre," affirmed "a much higher civilian death toll" than accepted by the Israeli government, and entertained "a death toll near 500 composed largely of civilians."

The focus here will not be on the way distinct and unfolding news-cycle events in the Middle East are covered by the media, but rather on a broader narrative that is repeated and reproduced as part of framing the Arab-Israeli conflict's origins and the reasons for the conflict's persistence. (For the former focus, see Matti Friedman's "[An Insider's Guide to the Most Important Story on Earth](#)," *Tablet*, Aug. 26, 2014, and "[Ongoing Controversy Around 'The Most Important Story on Earth'](#)," *Tablet*, Sept. 16, 2014.) However, this broader narrative—implicit in the "bride is beautiful" stories—is not limited to conversations about history, but walks alongside, informs, and structures ongoing media coverage, as will be

additionally discussed. Much Middle Eastern historical discourse is premised on the notion that Israel was sinfully born. Much ongoing media coverage of the region is premised on the notion “that Israel has lived in sin ever since.” (See Charles Krauthammer’s critique of this negative framing of Zionism and Israel in his “[The Collapse of Zionism](#),” *The Weekly Standard*, May 29, 2000, p. 32.) Those who eagerly take up the “bride is beautiful” stories, either without scrutiny of their veracity and sources or for the purpose of intentional distortion, are presupposing and attempting to convey the worst possible image of Zionists in the past; those who affirm a Jenin or al-Ahli Hospital massacre are presupposing and attempting to convey the worst possible image of Israeli Jews in the present.

Let us be honest: frequently undergirding the above presuppositions are also the accusation and denunciation—by now pronounced so often, for so long, and with so much symmetrical certainty that they no longer shock as they should—that Zionists and Israelis have been doing to Arabs what had been done to Jews in Nazi Europe. The accusation and denunciation are at once an attack, a defense, a wish, and an embedded reflex on the part of those even slightly antagonistic (let alone overtly hostile) toward Jews or Israel. For some, the “bride is beautiful” stories enable this prevailing parallel of the paradigmatically persecuted, dispossessed, and oppressed turning into the ultimate persecutors, dispossessors, and oppressors to be located even earlier in time, in occurrences prior to the Nazis having come to power and prior to the Second World War.

And now to a careful examination of the “bride is beautiful” stories. Though these stories preceded his book, their very rapid spread began with the publication of Avi Shlaim’s *The Iron Wall: Israel and the Arab World* (W. W. Norton & Co.) in December 1999. The work received immediate attention and was well-timed for soon-to-be events, including Israel’s

unilateral withdrawal from Southern Lebanon in May 2000, the failure of the Camp David Summit in July, the outbreak of the Second Intifada in September, and the World Conference against Racism in August–September 2001. In the prologue to that popular and often-cited history of the Arab-Israeli conflict, Shlaim—now Emeritus Fellow of St. Antony’s College and a former Professor of International Relations at the University of Oxford—wrote about the beginnings of political Zionism (p. 3):

The publication of [Theodor Herzl’s] The Jewish State evoked various reactions in the Jewish community, some strongly favorable, some hostile, and some skeptical. After the Basel Congress [i.e., the First Zionist Congress in 1897] the rabbis of Vienna sent two representatives to Palestine. This fact-finding mission resulted in a cable from Palestine in which the two rabbis wrote, “The bride is beautiful, but she is married to another man.”

This cable encapsulated the problem with which the Zionist movement had to grapple from the beginning: an Arab population already lived on the land on which the Jews had set their heart.

Shlaim offered no source for his account of Viennese rabbis, two fact-finding representatives, and a cautionary cable from Palestine, but with the publication of his influential book an assortment of “bride is beautiful” stories, which had been scarcer until then, quickly proliferated and became more prominent. Ghada Karmi, for instance—now a former research fellow at the Institute of Arab and Islamic Studies at the University of Exeter and a former Associate Fellow at the Royal Institute for International Affairs (Chatham House)—based the title and thesis of her *Married to Another Man*:

Israel's Dilemma in Palestine (Pluto Press, 2007), in which she described Israel as “an alien body implanted in the heart” of the Arabs’ region that they have rejected “just as the human body rejects a foreign organ graft” (p. 4), and argued for dissolving the Jewish state, on the same “bride is beautiful” story found in Shlaim’s book. Former Swedish diplomat Ingmar Karlsson emulated her with his 2012 anti-Zionist *Bruden är vacker men har redan en man: Sionisme—en ideologi vid vägs ände?* (The bride is beautiful but already has a husband: Zionism—an ideology at the end of the road?), which was [funded and distributed](#) by the Swedish Arts Council.

All versions of “the bride is beautiful” stories—which are often set during the 1890s (in Ottoman-ruled Palestine) and less frequently during the 1920s (in British Mandatory Palestine) —lack primary sources. Nevertheless, they have appeared, and continue to appear, in many books, articles, and films. Often, as with Shlaim and Karmi, no sources at all have been provided for these stories by those who have told them. Sometimes a specious one has been put forward. In the opening paragraph of his 2011 *College Literature* article “[Cry No More for Me, Palestine—Mahmoud Darwish](#),” Mustapha Marrouchi—at the time Professor and Rogers Fellow in Postcolonial Literature in the Department of English Literature at the University of Nevada at Las Vegas—cited Henry M. Christman’s *The State Papers of Levi Eshkol* as a source for the version he told, though there is no such story in Christman’s book, published in 1969:

Shortly after the First Zionist Congress in 1897, the Rabbis of Vienna sent two of their own to the then British Mandate of Palestine to explore the possibilities for immigration. “The bride is beautiful,” they cabled home. “But she is married to another man” (Christman 2000, 45).

In 2014, Marrouchi was fired from the University of Nevada at Las Vegas for [repeated plagiarism](#)—but when at a loss for a passage to lift, he was not above making up a citation too. And, of course, in 1897 the Land of Israel/Palestine was still ruled by the Ottoman Empire; the British Mandate for Palestine only commenced in 1920, a couple of decades later.

In some versions of the “bride is beautiful” stories, it is the First Zionist Congress, rather than the rabbis of Vienna, that dispatches the representatives to Palestine. In other versions, Herzl himself or his friend and fellow Zionist leader Max Nordau sends the rabbis and receives their reply. Sometimes the same writer will alternate between the stories’ different versions, as can be seen with one of the stories’ frequent tellers, the Egyptian journalist and public intellectual Mohamed Heikal, who deployed them in his *Secret Channels: The Inside Story of Arab-Israeli Peace Negotiation* (HarperCollins, 1996):

Herzl convened the first World Zionist Congress, which brought together Jewish representatives from many countries. It was held in Basel, Switzerland on 23 August 1897 and is regarded by Jews as a landmark in the creation of the state of Israel. The World Zionist Congress was created with the aim of establishing ‘a home for the Jewish people in Palestine secured under public law.’

After the Basel conference the rabbis of Vienna decided to see for themselves what Herzl was talking about, and sent two representatives to Palestine. A cable sent by the two rabbis during their visit became famous: ‘The bride is beautiful, but she is married to another man’. It was a message Zionists did not wish to hear, and the inconvenient husband was never acknowledged. (p. 23)

[Later](#), Heikal used the stories to portray Zionist Jews as unremittingly opposed to conciliation with Palestinian Arabs, suggesting that just as Herzl was unwilling to give up his plans to form a Jewish state in the Middle East—even though “the two rabbis he dispatched to Palestine” told him by telegram that the land was already possessed by others—it is similarly unlikely that contemporary Zionists will “compromise” (that is to say, agree to no longer have a Jewish state of any size in the Middle East) now that their sought after state already exists. In this subsequent telling, it is Herzl, rather than the rabbis of Vienna, who sent “the two rabbis” and received their cable.

Rawan Damen’s documentary *Al Nakba* (Al Jazeera Arabic, 2008/Al Jazeera World, 2013) incorporated a “bride is beautiful” story in which it is Nordau who “sent two rabbis” to Palestine, rather than the First Zionist Congress, the rabbis of Vienna, or Herzl. *The Independent*’s Joe Sommerlad [repeated](#) that version as part of his “A brief history of the Israel-Palestinian conflict” (May 13 and May 20, 2021), published during the eleven days of fighting between Israel and Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad in May 2021’s Operation Guardian of the Walls. Of the start of the Zionist movement, Sommerlad (following Damen) wrote:

Austro-Hungarian journalist Dr Theodor Herzl’s book The Jewish State appeared a decade later, envisioning the establishment of such an entity with the coming of the 20th century. Two rabbis were sent by Herzl’s friend Max Nordau to Palestine to investigate the feasibility of the prospect but reported back: “The bride is beautiful but she is married to another man.”

As a result of my critique of Sommerlad’s online article, *The*

Independent made significant changes to its content. The article was modified to state that the authenticity of the story about two rabbis being sent by Nordau to Palestine to investigate the feasibility of a Jewish state is “contested.” In addition, at first, this italicized editorial note [was appended](#):

This article was amended on 18 June 2021 to include a reference to Al Nakba as a source, and also to say that the authenticity of the quote ‘The bride is beautiful but she is married to another man’ is contested. We added a reference to extermination camps in relation to The Holocaust, changed an incorrect reference to Irgun ‘rising up’ in 1942 as it had already been active for some years by then, and also changed a reference to Resolution 338 to say it followed the Yom Kippur War, and not Black September, as had previously been incorrectly stated.

But a day after Hamas’ October 7, 2023 invasion of Israel, *The Independent*’s editors inexplicably republished what was essentially its same Al Nakba-based June 18, 2021 article—while removing Sommerlad’s name from the byline and replacing it with “Independent Reporters,” and while deleting all acknowledgment that the article had needed to be significantly amended over two years earlier in June 2021. (The Oct. 8, 2023 version of the article is still viewable [here](#).) Though an identical URL as for the 2021 article was being used by *The Independent*, the reworked article’s title was soon changed from “A brief history of the Israel-Palestinian conflict” to “[The Israel-Palestine conflict, explained](#).” This kind of erasure is not unique in *The Independent*’s coverage of Israel, and has been [shown](#) by Adam Levick of CAMERA in another context.

In a less widespread variant of the “bride is beautiful” stories the setting is not Western Europe, the lifetime of Herzl, or even the nineteenth century. Benjamin Beit-Hallahmi—now Emeritus Full Professor in the Department of Psychology at the University of Haifa—related a version supposedly involving Golda Meir in his 1992 *Original Sins: Reflections on the History of Zionism and Israel* (Pluto Press, 1992):

There is a famous story, told during a meeting between Prime Minister Golda Meir and a group of Israeli writers in 1970. A Jew from Poland visited Palestine in the 1920s. On his return to Europe, he summarized his impressions by saying: ‘The bride is beautiful, but she has got a bridegroom already’. Golda Meir responded by saying: ‘And I thank God every night that the bridegroom was so weak, and the bride could be taken away from him.’ (p. 74)

As is the case with the two rabbinic representatives from Vienna in other versions, the lone Jewish traveler to Palestine in Beit-Hallahmi’s story is unnamed. The traveler’s town or city of origin is not identified, either, and no specific year is given for his visit to Palestine or return to Poland. Beit-Hallahmi gave a year for Golda Meir’s meeting with Israeli writers, but no precise date or reference, and offered no source for the “famous story.”

Ilan Pappé—Professor of History and Director of the European Centre for Palestine Studies at the Institute of Arab and Islamic Studies at the University of Exeter—began the fourth chapter of his *Ten Myths about Israel* (Verso Books, 2017), which focused on discrediting the notion that “Zionism Is Not Colonialism” and in which he argued against what he described as the “myth ... that Zionism is a liberal national liberation

movement" (p. xi), with this account:

The land of Palestine was not empty when the first Zionist settlers arrived there in 1882. This fact was known to the Zionist leaders even before the first Jewish settlers arrived. A delegation sent to Palestine by the early Zionist organizations reported back to their colleagues: "the bride is beautiful but married to another man." Nevertheless, when they first arrived, the early settlers were surprised to encounter the locals whom they regarded as invaders and strangers. In their view, the native Palestinians had usurped their homeland. (p. 41)

Who was in the delegation to Palestine? When was it sent? By which Zionist organizations? Pappe cited Beit-Hallahmi's *Original Sins* as the source for the "bride is beautiful" story he told. But *Original Sins* made no mention of a pre-1882 "delegation sent to Palestine by the early Zionist organizations" and reporting "back to their colleagues" that "the bride is beautiful but married to another man." Rather, Beit-Hallahmi wrote of "a Jew from Poland" who "visited Palestine in the 1920s" and who had said, "The bride is beautiful, but she has got a bridegroom already." How did Pappe come by this anti-Zionist myth he related as historical fact? Why did he alter the details of Beit-Hallahmi's version involving Golda Meir? Pappe's use of a "bride is beautiful" story is symptomatic of his broader tendency to misrepresent information and misuse sources. Yet, without a trace of irony or self-awareness, he opened *Ten Myths about Israel*, which he claimed was meant to challenge Zionist "myths, which appear in the public domain as indisputable truths" (p. x), with these sentences:

History lies at the core of every conflict. A true and unbiased understanding of the past offers the possibility of peace. The distortion or manipulation of history, in contrast, will only sow disaster. As the example of the Israel-Palestine conflict shows, historical disinformation, even of the most recent past, can do tremendous harm. This willful misunderstanding of history can promote oppression and protect a regime of colonization and occupation. It is not surprising, therefore, that policies of disinformation and distortion continue to the present and play an important part in perpetuating the conflict, leaving very little hope for the future. (p. ix)

By 2020, Yasmeen Abu-Laban and Abigail B. Bakan were expounding intersectional gender and racial theories, and semiotics of patriarchy and objectification, around the “bride is beautiful” stories. Abu-Laban is Professor of Political Science and Canada Research Chair in the Politics of Citizenship and Human Rights at the University of Alberta. Bakan is a Professor in the Department of Social Justice Education at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, cross-appointed to the Department of Political Science, and an affiliate with the Anne Tanenbaum Centre for Jewish Studies. Their section on “Women’s equality, brand Israel, and rebranding” in *Israel, Palestine and the Politics of Race: Exploring Identity and Power in a Global Context* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020) began with the following:

The idea of Israel has historically intersected gendered narratives that are simultaneously racialized. The Zionist framing of an exclusively “Jewish” state rests, rather curiously, beside another narrative where the colonial project is understood as an act of heroic male conquest, challenging the simultaneously threatening and weakened

Indigenous Palestinian population. As Ghada Karmi (2007) reminds us, the first Zionist Congress in 1897, in Basel, Switzerland, entertained the idea of establishing a “Jewish state” in Palestine in such terms. Those in attendance heard the result of the explorations of two representatives to the region who had gone to consider the suitability of the project site for construction of a Zionist state. They reported to the conference by cable: “The bride is beautiful, but she is married to another man (Karmi 2007: v). The land was not in fact “a land without a people,” but inhabited by an Indigenous Palestinian Arab population. The effeminized land was framed in this brief statement as a married woman, and the Palestinian population was constructed as a competitor in the form of a masculinized threat, as “another” man. The contest for the land was, therefore, symbolized at the outset as one of patriarchal male competition for the previously betrothed, and objectified, bride. (p. 182)

According to Abu-Laban and Bakan, Karmi's *Married to Another Man* “reminds” readers of the “bride is beautiful” episode, but (as with Pappe's use of Beit Hallahmi's *Original Sins*) the version they told differed from the one found in her book. In Karmi's account (for which she, like Heikal in his *Secret Channels* and Shlaim in his *The Iron Wall*, provided no source), “the rabbis of Vienna” had sent the “two representatives” *after* the First Zionist Congress, not before or during it, and their cable was received by these rabbis in Vienna, rather than by Zionists in Basel. Given the specificity of Abu-Laban and Bakan's version and their attempted feminist/anti-racist interpretation of it, as well as the absence of a source for the story in Karmi's book and their divergence from her account, they might be expected to have done more to ascertain the episode's details and to make sure it took place. Moreover, the few early Zionists who used variations of the

phrases “a land without a people” or “a country without a people” –alluded to by Abu-Laban and Bakan, and often falsely said to have been widely-propagated slogans coined by Israel Zangwill or uttered by Herzl–did not mean that the Land of Israel/Palestine was then empty or uninhabited, but rather that it did not have at the time, to their minds, *a people* in it: a population, indigenous or otherwise, that was a distinctly identifiable or self-identifying *nation* like the Jews.

A “bride is beautiful” story also showed up in an article by the late Eric Silver, foreign correspondent and expert on Israel and the Middle East for *The Guardian* (“Decade of Disillusion,” June 4, 1977, p. 7), written on the ten-year anniversary of the Six-Day War:

An ageing pioneer was interviewed once on Israeli television. He explained how the elders of his Russian Jewish village had sent an emissary to Palestine to spy out the land. The man reported back: “The bride is beautiful, but she is already married.”

Silver’s language of spying out the land calls to mind the Biblical episode of the twelve Israelite spies sent to the Promised Land in Numbers 13, ten of whom advised Moses against trying to conquer the territory, reporting that “it is indeed a bountiful country—a land flowing with milk and honey ... But the people living there are powerful, and their towns are large and fortified” (vv. 27–28). How did Silver learn about this interview that “once” took place? What was the ageing pioneer’s name? When was he interviewed on Israeli television? On what program? Who was the interviewer? When did the emissary travel to Palestine? Which Russian Jewish village were the pioneer and the emissary from? Silver disregarded

these questions.

And a version of the stories made its way into Joseph Dorman and Oren Rudavsky's 2015 documentary *Colliding Dreams*. In the film's second section, "One Land. Two Peoples," Yaakov (Kobi) Sharett (the eldest son of Israel's second prime minister, Moshe Sharett) narrated the following over old black-and-white footage from the Land of Israel/Palestine, accompanied by melancholy piano music:

In the early years of Zionism, certain groups sent a mission to Palestine to see whether it is really a place which millions of Jews can go into. So they went around Palestine and then came back and wrote a report. And in the report, they said something of the sort—I think it was true: "Palestine is a wonderful place. It's like a beautiful girl. But the girl is already engaged." Meaning that it belongs already to some other people.

Sharett's version does not have even the illusion of specificity, such as a decade (pre-1882, the 1890s, or the 1920s), a European location (Vienna, Poland, or Russia), the size of the mission to Palestine (a lone traveler, two rabbis, or a larger delegation), or descriptive information about which organizations or individuals sent him/them and received his/their report (village elders, a rabbinic organization, a Zionist organization, Herzl, or Nordau). "Certain groups sent a mission." Who? When? From where? Sharett believed the mission's "report" to be "true," and the filmmakers' pictorial and musical framing of his story lends it credence, signaling to viewers that this was an event that took place in the early years of Zionism—conveyed by an authoritative speaker, the son of an Israeli prime minister—which sums up the injustice at the heart of the Arab-Israeli conflict.

In June 2012, I published "['The bride is beautiful, but she is married to another man': Historical Fabrication and an Anti-Zionist Myth](#)" (*Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies* 30, no. 3, pp. 35–61). I demonstrated that those who tell the "bride is beautiful" stories never provide primary sources for them and often provide no sources at all, and that there has been no basis for recounting these stories as historical events that occurred during the early years of the Zionist movement. I also showed that writers using the stories often have not maintained consistency even in their own telling, changing the details as they have told them over time. Perhaps such alterations are inevitable, as in all their variations the core of the stories does not have a primary source to reference and their tellers have been less concerned with accuracy than with advancing political and ideological agendas. Others, such as the blogger [Elder of Ziyon](#), Lisa Abramowicz, and [Hadar Sela](#) (writing about the BBC's Jeremy Bowen), subsequently addressed the misuses of these stories too. I followed up my 2012 article with several shorter pieces, including "['The bride is beautiful, but she is married to another man.' The tenacity of an anti-Zionist fable](#)" (*Fathom Journal*, Autumn 2020) and "['The Bride Is Beautiful But She Is Married to Another Man' Stories](#)" (*Middle East Quarterly*, Fall 2024). This much has remained constant: while no primary sources for the stories have surfaced, they continue to be retold uncritically.

What work do these stories perform? Why do so many scholars, journalists, and filmmakers eagerly repeat them, and why is there such reluctance to part with them, despite their lack of historicity? Although Israel's detractors expend great energy cataloging each of the country's real and imagined mistakes or wrongdoings, these are often attempts at distraction: many such people do not oppose individual Zionist actions or Israeli government policies so much as the very existence of a Jewish state of any size in the Middle East—which they view as unjust, anachronistic, atavistic, and criminal at its core.

The “bride is beautiful” stories neatly communicate that Zionists themselves recognized from the start exactly how it would be immoral for Jews to reclaim the Land of Israel/Palestine, but proceeded anyway, and that the creation of the state of Israel was entirely a willful and premeditated injustice. For this reason, the stories tend to accrue details (such as the direct involvement of Theodor Herzl, Max Nordau, or the First Zionist Congress) that better affix them to the initiators of political Zionism and thus to the original sin of efforts leading to the eventual reconstituting of a Jewish state. A country born so iniquitously is capable only of a litany of inhumane crimes and can do no right. Anything negative claimed about this evil entity’s past, present and future, anything that reinforces its culpability—including, circuitously, various connubial-themed stories predicated on the primal transgression of its formation—may be believed and reiterated. Historicity is irrelevant. At the more extreme end, whatever might in any way cloud or contradict this narrative—even posters pleading for the release of kidnapped Jewish women, children, and babies held hostage in the Gaza Strip—must be defaced, torn up, and removed from sight. All challenging facts need to be ignored, omitted, minimized, inverted, or denied. If it is no longer expedient to openly disavow that Palestinian invaders raped Israeli women as part of the October 7th onslaught, then a countercharge of Israeli soldiers raping Palestinian women must be leveled—with the Qatari propaganda conglomerate Al Jazeera claiming (and then retracting its claim) that Palestinian women were raped during renewed fighting at Gaza’s al-Shifa Hospital in March 2024, and with a speech delivered by President Biden on March 26 being [interrupted](#) by anti-Israel protesters shouting (even after Al Jazeera’s retraction) that “hospitals in Gaza are being bombed” and “women are being raped.”

Thus, the anti-Zionist potential inherent in the “bride is beautiful” stories remains irresistible to many scholars, journalists, and filmmakers. When Shlaim published an “Updated

and Expanded" edition of *The Iron Wall: Israel and the Arab World* (W. W. Norton & Co., 2014), he once again, and still without offering a source, included a "bride is beautiful" story. He made, however, one change. Shlaim now, without explanation, cited it as "an apocryphal story": "After the Basel Congress, according to an apocryphal story, the rabbis of Vienna decided to explore Herzl's ideas and sent two representatives to Palestine" (pp. 3–4). Even so, Shlaim went on to discuss the story as though it were *factual* and not apocryphal, exactly as he had done in 1999. He has taken the same approach in his latest book, *Three Worlds: Memoirs of an Arab-Jew* (Oneworld Publications, 2023):

Although Zionism was a rebellion against the European treatment of the Jews, its leaders appealed to the self-interest of the European great powers. Theodor Herzl, an assimilated Viennese Jew and the father of political Zionism, made this promise in 1896: 'For Europe we shall serve there as the vanguard of civilisation against the barbarians.' Apocryphally, the rabbis of Vienna decided to explore Herzl's ideas and sent two representatives to Palestine. The fact-finding mission resulted in a cable from Palestine in which the two rabbis wrote: 'The bride is beautiful, but she is married to another man.'

To make its way in the harsh world of international politics, and to overcome the predictable and inevitable opposition of the Palestine Arabs, the Zionist movement allied itself to Great Britain in the First World War. (pp. 34–35)

That now-pervasive "bride is beautiful" story has been too central to Shlaim's chronicling of Zionism to be treated with the historical rigor that would exclude it.

Karmi still presents a version of the story as fact on her [website](#) as part of personally promoting her 2007 *Married to Another Man: Israel's Dilemma in Palestine*. Instead of any public correction about the stories that she had based *Married to Another Man's* thesis on and that she had repeated in articles and interviews, in 2023 Karmi and her publisher, Pluto Press (which had also published Beit-Hallahmi's *Original Sins*), simply reissued what is essentially the same book under a new title: *One State: The Only Democratic Future for Palestine-Israel*. The "bride is beautiful" stories are absent from this new iteration. As for Marrouchi's article "Cry No More for Me, Palestine—Mahmoud Darwish" —which included a "bride is beautiful" story copied from a book review by Jonathan Shainin, and has been [retracted](#) by *College Literature* for plagiarism—Marrouchi still proudly mentions it among his "several works of literary criticism" in the third-person biography on his [website](#).

Many Jews were aware in the early years of the Zionist movement that there was a significant Arab population in the Land of Israel/Palestine relative to its Jewish population. Moreover, Zionists realized that much of the Arab population would not want Jews to immigrate or reestablish a Jewish state there. Herzl anticipated such opposition and wrote about it in *The Jewish State* (1896). Zionist leader Ze'ev Jabotinsky addressed it a century ago in his 1923 essays "The Iron Wall" and "The Ethics of the Iron Wall." However, Jewish visitors and Zionist immigrants to the Land of Israel/Palestine (and traditional Jews who had continued to live and resettle there over the centuries prior to the advent of political Zionism) did not consider the land "married" to anyone but the Jewish nation. Religious Zionists, who prayed multiple times a day for the ingathering of Jews into the Land of Israel, also recalled the words of Isaiah 62:5—addressed to the land and the nation of Israel, and chanted yearly in synagogues — about future sovereignty and redemption: "As a young man marries a young woman, so your sons will marry you. As a bridegroom

rejoices over a bride, so your God will rejoice over you.” To them, it was always the Jews’ land, even if others ruled the territory or were dwelling there.

In their efforts to reclaim the Land of Israel/Palestine, leaders of the Zionist movement initially sought assistance from imperial powers (e.g., Ottoman and British) for their endeavors—as Jewish leaders in the sixth century BCE had done in the Persian Empire when facilitating the return of Jews to the Land of Israel and a renewal of Jewish independence following the Babylonian exile—and then aimed to remove those powers from the land when they impeded Jewish immigration and the restoration of sovereignty. Believing the Land of Israel/Palestine to be their national heritage, and confident in the justice of their return to it, most Zionists were undeterred by Arab opposition. In “The Ethics of the Iron Wall,” for example, Jabotinsky argued that “It is an act of simple justice to alienate part of their land from those nations [i.e., the Arabs] who are numbered among the great landowners of the world, in order to provide a place of refuge for a homeless, wandering people [i.e., the Jews].” (By “alienate” he was not proposing that Arabs would have to leave the Land of Israel/Palestine, which he defined as also including Transjordan, but rather that they could not prevent Jews—a third of whose global population had not yet perished in the coming Holocaust—from returning there and becoming the majority.) Jabotinsky contended: “The principle of self-determination does not mean that if someone [i.e., the Arabs] has seized a stretch of land it must remain in his possession for all time, and that he who was forcibly ejected from his land [i.e., the Jews] must always remain homeless.” (See [here](#) for an English translation of “The Iron Wall” and “The Ethics of the Iron Wall” from the Jabotinsky Institute’s archive. I have quoted from pp. 7–8.) There is no need to resort to contrived stories to describe this history or to argue how best to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict. Yet the “bride is beautiful” stories seem indelible.

In the year of war that has followed Hamas and other Palestinian terror organizations and supporters' invasion of Israel, it has become common for the Jewish state's detractors—often the same people for whom historicity and context are otherwise inconsequential—to facilely proclaim that the invasion “did not happen in a vacuum” or that “history did not begin on October 7.” Indeed. There was Hamas' winning of the Palestinian Legislative Council elections in 2006 and its military takeover of the Gaza Strip six months later; there was Israel's conquest of Judea and Samaria/the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, and other territories in 1967 during its victorious Six-Day War; there was the annexation of the West Bank by the Kingdom of Jordan (formerly Transjordan) in 1950, while the Gaza Strip remained under Egyptian control; there was the fighting of 1947–1949 (Israel's War of Liberation) that resulted in Arab military loss, a displacement of Palestinian Arabs, and the rebirth of a Jewish state; there was the United Nations General Assembly partition plan of 1947, which Arab leaders rejected, opting for war instead of the creation of an Arab state alongside a Jewish one in what had been British Mandatory Palestine; there was the Allies' defeat of the Ottoman Empire during the First World War; there was the beginning of political Zionism in the nineteenth century; there was Napoleon Bonaparte's failed siege of Acre in 1799; there was David Reubeni and Rabbi Solomon Molkho's bid to procure arms and weapon-manufacturing capabilities for Jews to use in reclaiming the Land of Israel in the sixteenth century; there were the Crusades of the eleventh through thirteenth centuries; there was the Arab takeover of the Middle East in the seventh century; there was the Jewish revolt led by Bar Kokhba against Roman rule in Judaea in the second century; there was the Hasmonaean-led rebellion in the second century BCE, which reestablished a Jewish monarchy, against the Seleucid Empire; there was the return of Jews from the Babylonian exile to the Land of Israel beginning in the sixth century BCE, etc., etc.

But who can be bothered with all that context and complexity? The “bride is beautiful” stories efficiently work to situate the rise of political Zionism as a deliberate injustice accountable for the ills of the region’s modern history, and as uniquely responsible for producing the space in which ensuing ruinous events in the Middle East have unfolded—with the implication that the Jewish state (the Nazi, racist, settler-colonial, fascist, outpost of Western imperialism, apartheid, genocidal, doing-to-Palestinians-what-was-done-to-Jews, etc. state), which ought never have come into being, should now be dissolved and its replacement become the world’s twenty-second Arab and forty-seventh Muslim-majority country. Others, who operate from the same premises but are reluctant to articulate such a stark outcome, instead fancifully “pin their hopes on a bi-, multi-, or post-national state that would cleanse the stain, remedy the injustice, and redress the offense to the universal brought about by Israel’s Jewishness, and by Jewishness, period.” (See Alain Finkielkraut’s description of those hoping for these outcomes in his [“The Religion of Humanity and the Sin of the Jews,”](#) *Azure* 21, Summer 2005, pp. 29–30.) The carelessness of scholars, journalists, and filmmakers blends with ideological fervor, and the “bride is beautiful” stories, which confirm their prejudices, proliferate and become accepted truths that are difficult to dislodge, ingraining a fiction-based rejectionist discourse. What does it take to let go of cherished anti-Zionist narratives lacking historicity?

[Table of Contents](#)

Shai Afsai’s articles, short stories, poems, book reviews, and photographs have been published in *Anthropology Today*, *Haaretz*, *The Jerusalem Post*, *Journal of the American Revolution*, *New English Review*, *The Providence*

Journal, Reading Religion, Review of Rabbinic Judaism, Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies, and Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review. See more [here](#).

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