

Rahamim: Birthing Humanity
The Jewish Vocation of the 21st Century

by Prof. Shmuel Trigano

"All Jews are *rahmanim*, merciful beings", suggests a Talmudic dictum. Any discussion of the word *rahamim* ' benefits from an openness to interpretation, the better to comprehend its multiple meanings. *Rahamim* can designate something more than "mercy", a concept which on the face of it, in today's modern western mind, is hardly exultant—not to say rather negative, in fact, because it denotes pity. In the Hebraic consciousness, however, *rahamim* is rooted in and clarified by *rehem*—"matrix" or "womb". This opens before us immense spiritual horizons. It is through the relationship between the womb and the embryo, thus a feminine work, that Judaism thinks its identity, yet also thinks the work of Creation of the world and the relationship between Israel and other nations.

"Embryo" in Hebrew is *ubar*, that which "passes". And this stems from the same root as the word for "Hebrew" itself—the *Ivri*. One might as well say that a Hebrew conceives of him/herself as an embryonic being, who is in a process of passage in a world still incomplete; and this passage occurs under the aegis of *rahamim*. What is *rahamim*? It is the altruistic move of that person who steps away to make a place for the other—for the other about whom he knows nothing nor any idea of the attitude such a person will take toward him, in much the same way that a woman who conceives an infant makes a place in herself for a being that is pure potential: the embryo, the future child.

It is according to this very model that Judaism contemplates, in effect, the world's condition. God the Creator stepped away from himself in order to make place for man. The kabbalistic theory of *tzimtzum* is an elaboration of this idea. In this retreat, God suspended his infinite expansion with *rahamim* so as to conceive man as an embryo in the *rehem*, the matrix. This divine act is recognized in the notion of *rahamim*, Judaism's highest virtue.

God, then, doesn't become "smaller", in retreating to make room for man, as the act of *rahamim* or mercy in no way constitutes, as Nietzsche would say, a humility proper only to the inferior and the weak... On the contrary, in the *Pirkei'Avot*, mercy is associated with heroism (*gevura*), for "a hero is he who controls his instinct." We encounter this idea in the traditional interpretation of one of the Divine names of God, Shaddai, which is an expression of such an "heroism. By splitting the name into two elements, "Shad-dai", traditional commentators got: (the God) "she" (*amar*) "dai" (*le olamo*); that is, "he who said 'enough' to his world". In other words, this is the God who retreated to make room for man. "She – dai" could be read also "she (*yech lo*) dai": "he who is sufficient unto himself" and who therefore loses nothing when he provides , by creating man.

From this perspective, humanity is like an embryo in the spiritual womb of a God who creates the world the way a woman gives birth. This shows to what point, in Hebraic consciousness, man is not yet born and the world is incomplete. *Olam* which designates the "world" signifies absence, disappearance. The book of *Kohelet* (Ecclesiastes) admirably expresses this concept. All the wisdom of life flows in these few notions the Jews have conscientiously and practically applied throughout history. This is the model of alliance or *brit*. "To make an alliance" in Hebrew is said to "break an alliance." What is it that is "broken"? The illusion of the completion of the world which all empires throughout history embrace and decree that it is through such empires that man is achieved and already complete ; whereas Israel attests that the world is forever in need of *rahamim*, rather than a will to power, to achieve completion so that the world remember He who created it and who precedes it for eternity. In this way, Israel "breaks" the wholeness of the world in order to manifest the remembrance of its hidden origin—Israel reminds mankind that we are not yet born and that we are carried along by divine mercy.

We might apply this same model for an understanding of the relationship between Israel and other nations. Being "chosen", Israel has been set apart from the world, removed from the accounting of nations, and is a pure manifestation of divine grace; Israel is an opening to the nations of the world on a spiritual horizon, beyond the world of absence and disappearance. This retreat, in which Israel falls outside the balance of nations, carries the world just as the *rehem* carries the embryo, the project of humanity yet incomplete. It was the path Abraham opened before us in discovering the virtue of *Hesed*, of "mercy": it became the Noah's Ark of humanity in distress. Israel is that which is almost "too much," *en trop*, for humanity, a kind of surplus value, and which, accordingly, is the very basis of any accounting. Israel testifies to the principle of passage in humanity that established itself on earth and cedes to the spell of rootedness.

Jewish tradition has added to this perspective a kind of thematic of genders, seeing in the *rahamim* model the relationship between masculine and feminine. In the relationship of creation, God the Creator thus holds the feminine position to a humanity created in the masculine position. All that is at stake in the human vocation is that the masculine remember the feminine, turning to the feminine visage as did Adam who, once he has been separated from Eve, find the moral strength to turn back to her and recognize her as other, as coming from, yet distinct, from him.

The same relationship is played out as well in the dynamic between Israel and other nations. Israel's retreat *tests* the femininity of being in the face of nations which incarnate the destiny of masculinity; and all of history is staked on such nations remembering Israel, this people that comes as a surplus among peoples; and these nations turn back to face Israel to reconcile with humanity.

A similar relationship is equally in play where the spiritual being of Israel is concerned: masculine and feminine are found in the

relationship between Sephardic identity³, which at the world's core incarnates femininity in exile; and Ashkenazi identity⁴ which embodies masculinity and a relationship of externals. The essential here is that the two sides of Jewish-being⁵ recognize one another in order to unify the divine Name.

In each of the Sephardic and Ashkenazi models, meanwhile, the destiny of the masculine and the feminine are equally in play, for masculine and feminine are not essences but postures, or poses, in the face of existence - modalities, if you will, in relationship with the world. We find yet another correspondence to this thematic in the internal relationship of Judaism as spirituality: between *Halakha* and Midrash, philosophy and Kabbala, Diaspora and Israel...The play, the give-and-take between masculine and feminine, of course, is also found in the destiny of each individual and in a major way in the couple, history's project being the unity of the couple by way of mutual recognition, bringing together masculine and feminine, law and grace, rigor and mercy...

On this basis, then, what is Israel's vocation? The incomplete world awaits its *Tikkun*, its "reparation", its wholeness, and it is man's task as well as the vocation of Israel. Man in effect must achieve himself its own creation with the Creator, "Let us make (I, the Creator with the creature) man in our image" (Genesis 1, 26). In just this spirit, the Talmud suggests that man is God's "partner" (*shutaf*) in creation (*Sanhedrin* 199, b; *Shabbat* 10,a)—a creation that remains, therefore, to be completed. To do this, man does not find himself alone. He has the example of Abraham and the Law of Sinai. He must deal with the creative eclipse of God in order to approach God. Israel as a continuation of Abraham is at the center of this project, and is a witness to the absence, a symbol of hope, and the vector of redemption through its ritual and messianic acts . By means of its dispersion to the four corners of the universe, Israel enacts the destiny of humanity but is also called upon to reunite the four corners of the universe in the act of return, in the Teshuva that must put an end to humanity's self-exile. In this manner, the action Israel is meant to take for humanity unfurls within Israel, and Israel's destiny becomes the indicator of humanity's own situation.

Such is the global scheme of Jewish identity from a spiritual perspective. And what can one learn from this today? One of the most notable phenomena of the contemporary age could well be taken for a "catastrophe" of the *rahamim* model, as we've defined it. The two great events of contemporary Jewish history might be interpreted from this perspective. The Holocaust could well be understood as the rebellion of the embryo against the womb which carries it.

In the Shoah, *rahamim* was transpierced by those who were the beneficiaries. Compassion, the principle of the womb, appeared as a weakness and exposed he who witnessed this weakness to the most awful hardships. In all generosity, the

mother conceived the child but the resultant weakening from such a free act furnished its very beneficiary an occasion for aggression against her... Something akin to the mother's murder was produced. It was first the value of *rahamim* that found itself in question, but also and above all the very foundation of humanity's survival. You had a humanity that wished to completely eradicate the symbol and the memory of the "surplus"—the abundance and the gracious gift, which it is the result of, condemned to disappearance, for that is her very origin. Humanity denied here the principle upon which the world was founded, the gratuitousness of *rahamim*, of mercy and compassion, the free act of God. It's quite as if humanity manifested a rebellion against God. And ever since, humanity has been left in the balance. European civilization traverses dark times, dare we say moribund times? It may be that civilized Europe is on its deathbed... Yet a newness on earth has yet to appear, a new civilization has yet to make itself apparent in the world; a new message has yet to be heard.

And yet—and this is the second most notable event of our times—there is another center; the center of centers from Judaism's viewpoint has reappeared in the history of the Jews: the Land of Israel. The return of Jews to Zion and the birth of the State of Israel marks a monumental turning point in history, in the Jewish economy of salvation. It is as though exile came to an end while the in-gathering of exiles played out in Zion, as the prophecy announces.

We must therefore apprehend contemporary Jewish destiny by means of the model of exile and of return. The most powerful question is to know if we are living the end of exile; that is, according to our thematic, if the phase of exile, as a retreat of the *rehem* or womb, is complete and if, with the *rehem* coming to its center, if the embryo carried by this womb is at the point of being expelled, of being birthed.

To put it another way, it's urgent to determine whether we have come upon messianic times. This question today weighs on all of Judaism. If we have entered the messianic age, as we've been led to believe by numerous indicators (the in-gathering of exiles, the rebirth of the Hebrew language, the reconstruction/resurrection of Jerusalem, and the strongest constitution ever in the history of a Jewish state), what then becomes of the diaspora? Does it continue? Does it not fall outside of Jewish destiny? In effect, Judaism never thought of a situation in which exile would continue while return is at work...Isn't the Diaspora on its way to vanishing, and isn't Israel on its way to becoming the only center of the Jewish world for the century ahead? And even if Diasporic communities continue to subsist, will they form a part of Judaism as it has classically been considered till today: that is, as a system of exile and return?

But have we entered messianic times entirely? Let's reflect on the nature of return to Zion today. If the return of the exiled, *kibbutz galuyot*, is a concrete fact, we can only establish that the messianic society dreamt by the prophets has not yet realized itself in the State of Israel. The sign, we could say, is in the fact

that Judaism has remained exiled in the heart of Israeli society. Everything in the Zionist political agenda aimed to break with Judaism and that's just what has happened. But that wouldn't so much as explain that the observant have with dignity incarnated the message of the Torah. Did they even realize that they were no longer in a shtetl of Central Europe but in Jerusalem? The strongest expression of this internal exile carries a sociological dimension: and that would be the exile of the Sephardic world in the heart of the Jewish world itself. This world has, in effect, remained poorly, marginally represented. Even as it found itself in Zion's majority, the Sephardic world endures a terrible internal solitude, an exile of profound dimensions, which is one of the forms of exile of Torah in the contemporary Jewish world, in the manner of the internal exile of women and of younger generations of Jews who aren't finding a place within the Jewish world framework. The two great parts of the historical Jewish world were destroyed these last fifty years—European Judaism was destroyed, Sephardic communities disappeared from their ancestral lands and the Sephardim found themselves dispersed to the four corners of the earth. All this to say that the classic context of Jewish identity just up and vanished. This internal exile, this exile within the return, seems to me the most marked characteristic of contemporary Jewish spirituality: it is indeed the moment where absence is the strongest and the most poignant. Without our realizing it, this profound spiritual drama silently rends the Jewish soul - and this will become more and more - painful as time goes on.

All these manifestations underline just how much *rahamim* itself is in question in Jewish consciousness today. For a century now, we've invested far more trust in power than in the spirit; we have not found a happy medium between the two. This period has been one of triumphant masculinity; we've seen femininity fall back in the soul of Israel—this femininity defined by compassion. The exile of the Sephardic world in the Jewish people today, quite like the perdurable exile of women in Judaism, is the most marked and dramatic of indicators. It is in those who carry this internal exile that a sense of hope might be recaptured, for these exiles attest to the world's incompleteness and are therefore a message of hope. They know full well that the path has not yet been beaten and that Israel once again must rise to go forward.

The problem of Israel returned to its land has much to do with the dimension of "passage" that we find in Judaism. In political Zionism, we have favored the idea that the return to Zion represented a "normalization" of the Jewish people, who would then become "a people like others", a people that would settle down, establish roots and become one with the Land. We would become, in other words, a people that would no longer be in movement and who, consequently, would no longer assume its universal vocation. This is the great failure of Zionism, which managed instead to make of Jerusalem, that splendid capital, a little provincial town following in the stead of New York or Paris rather than becoming the world center from which emanates the Word.

Today, I would argue, we must rediscover this dimension of passage, of motion, of the active voice. "The voice is the voice of Jacob, but the hands are the hands of Esau." (Genesis); we must rediscover the currency of compassion, coming back in the world as the porters of the human ideal. We do this today only negatively, as the masters of the memory of genocide, of humanity destroyed. In destroyed humanity we must witness humanity-becoming, humanity-toward-being—humanity as a project of mankind. We are today in the position of Abraham who, having left a corrupt civilization, carries the ideal of humanity. The locus to carry such a message has been physically restored with Israel, and it remains without contents, void of this great ambition and this great generosity.

The problem, true, is profound: after two centuries of modernity, Jewish history has virtually vanished in the history of the Jews. And its return in the resurrected City of the Jews has for now brought about catastrophe and caricature. What Judaism is missing is a fresh manner of thinking politics, of thinking the life of man in the *polis*. I don't doubt that this will prove to be the task of the 21st century—a time when a new Jewish creativity will bloom, along with a new commentary of the Torah. I am certain or at least I share the hope, that Judaism will survive the next century. It is undergoing, in effect, a grave crisis of which few today are quite aware. The religious fundamentalism which has also affected our people, represents a withering reaction destined to hide this frightening normative and substantive void at Judaism's core. Very soon, this void will appear in the bright light of day, and this will be Judaism's hardest hour. I am uncertain that the rabbinical Judaism which established itself with the Talmud and its codification will survive the test. It shows itself today to be particularly maladjusted to Jewish life in a Jewish state. Likewise, the divisions now familiar to us in varying religious currents are destined to vanish. They are only a century and a half in age, and we can see, today, in terms of Jewish observance, a grand convergence toward the center—toward a centrist Judaism.

I rather believe that we find ourselves on the eve of times that shall see the return of prophecy in Jewish consciousness. Can we imagine such a thing? When a Jewish state has been reconstructed, which is to say when the *Keter Malkhut* or "Crown of Royalty", has arisen; when the Land of Israel has been reintegrated and then the *Keter Kehuna* or "Crown of Priesthood" is reinforced, how can we "survive" spiritually and practically without the prophet's voice? To my mind, this upheaval of givens in the Jewish existence will ineluctably conduce to the renewal of prophecy as an authority of word, teaching and discernment. The spirit of Judaism must in effect take back its freedom in relation to all institutions and appointed authorities, for this spirit today chokes beneath such iron collars.

This freedom must be recovered because it brings with it the true creativity of the future; it is a freedom from the institutional authorities of Judaism, freedom from Jews themselves, freedom that is the greatest show of faith to the Word from Sinai. Judaism must no longer appear as a power that

imposes itself over Jews, but be a clarion call, an incitement—an opening to a wider experience. This is what I term the prophetic dimension. Indeed, a dimension inscribed in the most authentic teachings of the Torah: in effect, in biblical times, at the side of the *Keter Malkhut*, and the *Keter Kehuna*, there was also the *Keter Tora* - the crown worn neither by the king nor the priest (from which the rabbi descends), but worn by the prophet alone. Do we realize the immense teaching concealed in this concept, which informs us that the Torah as authority can neither be assimilated nor reduced to a rabbinical (or political power), but that it remains autonomous—available to all Israel and responsible for all Israel? What it comes down to is that the spirit of the Torah waxes where it will, that it is greater and more legitimate than any and all of its incarnations and its successive institutional versions. Here we have the key to Israel's everlastingness, to its continuity, to its creativity.

It is the mission of our generation to rediscover this teaching and to put it to work.

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translated by .

- 1 *rahamim* is best translated as mercy or compassion,
- 2 Like *rahamim*, *Hesed*, the fourth *Sefirah*, may be translated in a variety of ways, including as divine mercy grace, even love.
- 3 In his book *La récit de la disparue* (Gallimard, Paris, 1977), Trigano coined the term *sélaradité* or “Sephardism”.
4. *ashkénazité*, or “Ashkenazism” ~
- 5 Trigano often uses the term, *Judéité* or “Jewish-being”, a sense of identity that is something more than Jewishness and which was first coined by Albert Memmi, but Memmi used it in order to differentiate between Judaism and Jewishness. This Trigano does not intend it.