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THE MEMORY OF THE LOST PEOPLE

Shmuel Trigano

The generations born into pre- and post-World War II Jewry experienced two great cataclysms of unequal gravity in nature and extent but with equally serious consequences when gauged by the yardstick of the experience and the continuity of the groups affected. The two groups constituting the Jewish world in fact were shattered by the events of an appalling century. In the Holocaust, the most vibrant centers of the Ashkenazi world were decimated, in an immeasurable catastrophe. With the decolonization, and the subsequent “nationalization” of the Arab world, the Sephardi world lost the very environment in which it existed.

These two arenas of upheaval reveal the link connecting the two ordeals of the Jews of this period: World War II is the linchpin. It is in its aftermath that the decolonization process was triggered in North Africa and the Middle East. The story of Europe, in particular in modern times, is at the heart of this history. With the advent of the European Nation-State, which gave the Jews citizenship only at the individual level, the Jewish people, by reason of its dispersal, lost any practical and legitimate basis of existence.¹ Hannah Arendt, seeking an explanation for antisemitism, considered that the Jews (in this case the Ashkenazim) as a *people* had lost their ambiguous place as mediators in Europe partitioned by the Nation-States, when in 1914 these had entered the era of total war, so that the mass extermination of the Jews was inevitable and only a matter of time.² The fate of the Jews of the southern area of the Mediterranean (in this case the Sephardim) had long been tied to Europe: originally, with the expulsion from Spain; then, subsequently, with the protection that the “capitulations” system of the European powers afforded them against the arbitrariness of the Ottoman regime,³ removing them from the condition of *dhimma*; and, finally, their delivery by the colonial powers from their inferior status of “protected people”, of *dhimmis*.⁴ With decolonization, their destiny was identified with that of the colonizers, sent home by the

colonized, even though the majority of Sephardim had no "home" in Metropolitan France, like the colonial populations. In fact they had been living in these colonial countries often long before their domination by Islam.

The Jewish condition was transformed by this dual trauma. Central and Eastern Europe, one of the oldest centers of Jewish culture, disappeared for ever from the arena of Jewish history. With rare exceptions (pacific as in Morocco, dangerous as in Iran) there are no longer any Jewish communities in the Arab countries.

I. An Unfinished Exile

Since the loss of its original "heimat," how can the Sephardi condition be described today? Can it be said to be characterized by the exile? Concretely, the Sephardim are not yet distanced from their transplantation and dispersal. Psychologically and intellectually, they are floundering in a kind of internal exile. It is in Israel that this lack in themselves and in the world is most strongly felt, because of their messianic expectations of Zion. The Israeli experience was marked by the ordeal of a sudden discrepancy. They expected to arrive in the land promised by the prophets, but were propelled into the historic arena of political Zionism whose ideological plan was to terminate Jewish exile and to derive a "new man" from the old Diaspora Jew. Although very close to the climactic and geographical milieu of their former Mediterranean localities, the cultural Israel that they encountered thus did not really validate their age-old expectations.

In France too, where many already had citizenship, the benefit of the language and cultural familiarity, but which constituted a very different physical milieu, their exile was paradoxical. France no longer embodied a distant ideal model, but was now identified with daily routine. Immersion in a "Metropolitan" world, marked by Christian culture and a centrist political culture, ended the existential arrangement in which they had lived with the coexistence of a mosaic of communities and religions under the majority, but inert, weight of Islam and under the aegis of a sure but distant metropolitan political power. For those who immigrated to the Americas, the rupture was total. So far from the Mediterranean and the East, from their specific human milieu, they were transplanted as it were to another planet, even though, making the most of a bad situation, they were reminded by the American spaces and the natural multiculturalism of these immigration lands, as Naim Kattan once wrote, of the infinite spaces of the desert and the colorful landscapes of the East.

Can the situation described above really be defined as an "exile"? This would imply that the Sephardim had previously "put down roots" in their native regions. Yet, despite several ingrained myths, which see in them (above all for

the North African Jews) descendants of Berber tribes converted to Judaism (although there may well have been some conversions), this was not the reality as regards symbols of identity. The Sephardi consciousness, before the exodus of the 1960s, still clearly remembered multiple previous exiles and origins. Their acculturation to France, from Morocco to Syria via Alexandria, already amounted to a kind of symbolic detachment, very real for those who had received citizenship, in relation to the local milieu, an awkward position, set apart from the native population, yet themselves part of the native population in the eyes of the Europeans. However, this difference, specific to the colonial era, and constituting part of the legal forms, merely intensified a prior break, deriving from the marginalization of these Jewish populations which had lived a kind of "established exile," in the customs and institutions of the Arab-Moslem regimes. The feeling of otherness deriving from this still bore the echo of the greatest trauma experienced by the Sephardi world of the West and the Middle East until the twentieth century: the fifteenth century expulsion from Spain, which gave rise to the dispersal-disappearance of the powerful Judeo-Spanish civilization, which had given them even their name of "Sephardim,"⁵ destined then to be broken up, from the Mediterranean to the Americas via Holland. The memory of Spain, simultaneously extolled and cursed, had always remained with them, even when they had forgotten the language or had retained only a smattering in a Judeo-Arabic whose very real Spanish vocabulary attests to their buried origins. Moreover, the arrival of these Spanish Jews had been a shock for the Jewish populations already settled in North Africa or the Orient, bringing with it new customs and different Judaic norms. When Spain was part of the Moslem empire, there was little difference between the Jews of Spain and those living in its other provinces, since the exchanges allowed by the communications unifying this empire from Cordoba to Baghdad were well developed. The Reconquista of the Spanish lands by the Christian kingdoms naturally promoted a specific history for the Jews, long established there and originally Arab-speaking. Fleeing to the Moslem world, they found themselves naturally differentiated from the local Jews; there were great tensions in the communities between *meqorashim* (expelled Jews) and *toshavim* (local inhabitants). Even today such tension still sometimes exists, a rival identity between Judeo-Spanish Sephardim and Judeo-Arab Sephardim, as if the dividing line of Spain between Islam and Christianity had left indelible traces. Notwithstanding, the Arab world itself did not always present a single unified block for the Jews: the Ottoman Empire was added in the sixteenth century to the already deposited strata of the preceding periods, giving new unity to the remains of the shattered Arab empire, and again unifying a large part of the Sephardi world.

As shown by this brief summary of the historic trajectory, even before the turning point of the 1950s and 1960s, Sephardi consciousness already had the memory of numerous exiles. Colonial France, by its assimilating power, had merely summed up, for most of them, who were within its sphere of influence,

all their foreign experiences. In reality, they had already "departed," over a century before packing their suitcases and this departure was merely superimposed on their structural marginality in the Arab world.

Forty years after the disappearance of its places of residence, Sephardi consciousness is today experiencing a pivotal moment. It is now faced with the question of memory and continuity, after having invested itself emotionally, to the point of forgetting itself, in the effort of relocation and survival, following the great upheaval that terminated its centuries-old settlement. Indeed, the last generation acquainted with the countries of origin is now reaching maturity and is faced with the question of transmission. It is tackling the second side of its life and perceives more acutely the role of link that it must play, if the world in which it was born deserves to survive, to continue, in any case to be remembered. Is what made it what it is, in the experience of the senses and the soul, fated to disappear for ever in the memory of the young generations born in the land of exile? What is "transmissible" in this experience? Is the heritage of the Sephardi world doomed to disappear completely? We may be led to think so when we see the current erosion of its classical culture, the fragility of its transmission channels, not to say the lack of self-awareness that characterizes it. Is a human universe in the process of complete dissolution?

Sephardi memory seems to be suspended. It might even be sick as shown by the strange return to religion characterizing certain of its milieus: seeking to return to their origins, they find no better way than a traumatic deculturation. In any case, today this memory is blocked. It is as if the work of memory has not been carried out, as if it was still stumbling against insurmountable obstacles. The past must be mourned before it can be transmitted and before memory can do its work. It is as if an age-old history had not been brought to an end, as if the symbolical and practical break had not been made between this not so remote past and the present.

It might be considered a proof of vitality and health not to consider the end of a very long cycle of consciousness and history. Yet, only on the basis of this affirmation of extinction (not of death) can life continue. It is only by acknowledging the reality that Sephardi consciousness will be able to take stock of what it was, what it is and what it could be in the future, if it is to have a future. This is the problem today. Sephardi consciousness is at an impasse.

II. The Obstacles to Memory

What might disrupt the work of Sephardi memory, in the experience of the transitional generations that we are, living a transition between two states of reality, one dead, and the other still in limbo? We postulate that the entire experience of the century is summed up in its specific difficulties, so point that we cannot understand them without reflection on the entire history of

contemporary Judaism. Five propositions can help us to define them. Reflection on these will clarify and serve as a foundation.

1. The Shadow of the Holocaust

The tragedy of the Ashkenazi world was infinitely more serious than the Sephardi drama. Apart from the Balkans where an age-old life was completely eradicated by the Nazis, the Sephardim escaped extermination in extremis in the Middle East and in North Africa. In light of this fact and of the empathy that they felt for their brethren when the uprooting projected them among them, they spontaneously suppressed the clear consciousness of their own trauma or addressed it in the perspective of the Holocaust. It was perhaps also a way of redefining their tie to the West when they emerged from the cataclysm that had struck them. They spontaneously showed their awareness of the existence of the Jewish people, but this precluded the work of mourning their own suffering. Yet, at the same time this empathy was unthinkable, if not to say sacrilege, for many Ashkenazi milieus, which had found in the memory of the Holocaust an identity emblem specific to their ethnic group, a sign of belonging to the "Jewish people," from which logically the Sephardim could only be excluded; the legitimacy of the Sephardi experience and memory was blunted because they had not suffered the Holocaust.

2. The Refocusing of Identity on Judaism

The ambiguous status of the Sephardim in the century that preceded the great uprooting certainly plays a role in the difficulty of forming the memory. They were both "native," close to the colonized Moslem society, and distant from it, "Europeans," close to the colonizer or the foreigner, an interface between two worlds (very distant worlds, those of the colonized and the colonizer), in the space of which they had formed a new soul—and a certain power (of mediation)—, so that any self-perception that they might have had was dulled (unless it attained a liberty which was unaware of itself). The identity scale in which they played their score was in fact very broad, combining multiple allegiances at the same time, and this freed them from self-definition, in principle restrictive. Yet, with the departure, they found themselves *Pieds-Noirs* (Algerian-born Frenchmen) among the *Pieds-Noirs*, displaced persons in Metropolitan France, immigrants among the Israelis, foreigners among the North Americans, Sephardim among the Ashkenazim. The circumstances imposed upon them an alignment of identity which no longer allowed half-tones, an evolution which helped to intensify the loss of sense of direction and the confusion of identity.

The most marked phenomenon in this sense seems to have been the very term "Sephardi," until then completely forgotten and of which generally they

