

## Otherness, Openness and Rejection in Jewish Context

Esther Benbassa

---

In the West, the Jew is the other<sup>1</sup>). He is an intimate other, in some sort. He is such, to begin with, thanks to the continuous presence on the European continent of Jewish communities that, in some cases, have displayed an astonishing stability over the centuries. He is such, again, because European civilization has to some extent constructed itself by contemplating its reflection in him. The Jew is the other from which triumphant Christianity was born, and, simultaneously, against which it constructed its identity. Finally, he is an intimate because it was in following the sometimes serpentine, yet decisive paths of emancipation and integration that, in the contemporary period, the Western Jew fully assumed his role in the advent and development of modernity, on both sides of the Atlantic. The gaze that the West has turned on the Jew as other—a gaze of rejection, yet, no less, of fascination, envy, but also admiration—has also had a great deal to do with fashioning the gaze that the Jew has turned on himself.

The fact remains, however, that the Jew is not simply the West's other. Nor is he simply what he has finally become today, the other of a certain Islam. The Jew is a subject. And, like any human society, Jewish society too has put the image of the other to work in constructing and defining itself. It has made use of the non-Jewish other and the Jewish other. And the untold recastings and remodelings of this image attest, in their fashion, to the mutations and the profound variability, down through history, of Jewish identity itself. Ask the Jews about their image of the other and you will quickly discover the conception they have of themselves. The ambiguousness of the figure of the other as a socio-cultural construct refers us to the ambiguousness of the one who produces it. The reason is that the other is also always another self: a mirror and, at the same time, a foil. This is a rather banal truism, after all; but it holds, perhaps, all the more powerfully in the case of a group which has, historically, been a dispersed minority and therefore vulnerable, and which has consequently had a natural tendency to feel both attracted and threatened by the majority in the society in which it lives.

The status of the Pentateuch in Jewish culture is a good illustration of such ambiguities. What is the Pentateuch, after all? It is the text around which the Jewish community has come

together, the text in which it recognizes itself and which it puts at the center of its liturgy. That it will be read chapter after chapter, week after week, is ensured by the ritual. This reading ends when the year does, and can then start over again “from the beginning”—indefinitely. Thus it is a text for itself, and its interminable spiral wraps itself around the group and protects it. But the Pentateuch is also the text of the other: it forms the core of the Old Testament that Christianity has appropriated, since it has decided to regard it as the first form, but only the first form, of a message the keys to which are all found in the New.

What, again, is the Pentateuch? It is Moses’ written record of the word of the wholly-other, of a God Who, in some sense, invents the people of Israel the moment he concludes a covenant with it. It is, with Adam and Noah, the history of the beginnings of humanity and, with Abraham, of the beginnings of a people different from all the others. It is the evocation of the tribulations that gradually made it possible for this people to tear itself from the indistinction of the merely human, to divorce itself from the other, and to take on its own identity in the act of breaking with every imaginable Egypt and every sort of slavery. It is, finally, the text of the Law that justifies and codifies the distinction between what is permitted and what is forbidden, as well as that between the self and the others.

Yet the Pentateuch is simultaneously the narrative of something left unfinished, because everything comes to a halt on the threshold of the Promised Land, and because Moses, the spokesman and secretary of the Lord, himself dies in the wilderness, perhaps uncertain that he has fully accomplished his task, and, at any rate, cheated of all the future achievements in which he is not invited to take part. The Law of the Pentateuch is not an iron Law, an unambiguous point. In this Law, the demand for separation rubs shoulders with the ethical demand; the other is a temptation and a danger, but also an object of compassion and the beneficiary of a genuinely even-handed justice.

Finally, the Pentateuch is a text that has loomed up before countless generations of commentators like some impregnable fortress. It is an obscure, contradictory, sometimes shocking text, one that, albeit well and truly ours, has nevertheless revealed itself to be terribly other. Century after century, it has made critics sweat blood and tears to re-appropriate it, to turn its words every which way in order to tease new, intelligible, acceptable meanings out of them. It has invited both ancient and modern thinkers to display a hermeneutic daring which alone is capable of saving it.

We need only think of our contemporaries. Humanist, universalistic Jewish thinkers have refused to yield to the temptation of a narrow particularism, yet have not abandoned the principle of Election—of, that is, the singularity and value of the Jewish experience. Jewish feminists have confronted the “machismo” of this text. Even Jewish gays have attempted to circumscribe or neutralize its “homophobia.” What, indeed, are we to make, today, of a text that a secularized Jewish nationalism has transformed into a political charter and the foundation of a historical right? What are we to make of a text that, in both its history of the

Creation and its enunciation of the Law, puts women in a position of subjection and subordination? What are we to do with a text that imposes the death penalty on what it regards as the “abomination” of sexual relations between two men?

However, at bottom, the Bible is of no significance whatsoever. What counts is its readership: those living Jews, past and present, who have sought to open, in the wall of its discourse, the breach through which the other can once again slip, through which life can once again flow in order to irrigate the aridity of this text and re-animate the words that have grown stiff and brittle with age. The other is still a part of this text, because, like it or not, it is still a part of life. He who seeks it there will find it there. And, finding it, he will find himself. Indeed, the figure of the other, whether mirror or foil, always emerges from ambiguity, because that ambiguity is emblematic of a definitive, insurmountable interdependence, and because it is ultimately the other which makes me what I am and enables my full self-realization. Ultimately, the one is never possible without the other. The Book needs its readers. The text needs life. And the Jew needs his other. Let us, then, interrogate this text, fecundating it with the lessons of history — in other words, of life. In the (his)story it tells, there is something not for the Jew alone, but for his other as well.

In the traditions of Deuteronomy later adopted by the prophets, the covenant between God and Israel is the founding paradigm of Judaism. When destruction rains down on the Jewish people, the reason is by no means that they have been abandoned by a God Who has been negligent in the performance of his duties or that they have been eclipsed in the competition with the other forces of the universe. God is present, and the destruction must be considered a punishment commensurate with Israel’s sins. Indeed, this punishment even becomes an expression of God’s continuing interest in his people insofar as the suffering inflicted on it ensures the expiation of its sins and allows the survivors to re-establish their relationship with God. In the tragedy of its downfall, Israel’s enemies are merely the intermediaries chosen by God to punish its iniquities; once they have served their purpose, they too are struck down. Their chastisement is the more severe to the extent that they go beyond the limits of the divine plan and punish Israel more harshly than was necessary. Thus the antagonism between God and His suffering people is mediated by the presence of an enemy who had earlier been confused with God. From now on, the enemy comes forward as a distinct figure who can be made to bear the brunt of Israel’s bitterness. It is precisely his existence which makes reconciliation between Israel and its God possible.

Yet both Israel and God have another, radical enemy who poses a threat, a terrible one, to the people’s very existence. Amalek, Esau’s grandson, is his original, absolute, emblematic incarnation. Amalek is the first enemy Israel meets after crossing the Red Sea. Joshua wages war on him, and, with Moses’ blessing, defeats him “with the edge of the sword.”<sup>2)</sup> “And the Eternal said to Moses: ‘Write this as a reminder in a book and recite it in the hearing of

Joshua: I will utterly blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven.’”<sup>3)</sup> Yet Amalek is by no means destroyed. The memory of his treacherousness forever haunts the consciousness of the Jews. He launched his assault on the stragglers, attacking Israel from behind, at a time when the people, having just torn itself from Pharaoh’s clutches, was exhausted, at the end of its strength. Amalek, for his part, does not fear God. It is because he goes so far as to assail the throne of the Eternal that war will be waged against him for all time: “from generation to generation!”<sup>4)</sup> His name becomes a symbol: Amalek, the enemy par excellence.

Haman, the minister of Ahasuerus, king of Persia and Media, is the archetype of the anti-Semitic persecutor and the first man, according to Biblical sources, to have planned a massive extermination of a dispersed Jewish population. Fortunately, his plan was foiled by Mordechai and Mordechai’s cousin Esther, who had, in the meantime, become Ahasuerus’ wife. Haman himself was a descendant of Amalek’s.<sup>5)</sup> Even if the dating and the historical reality of the events recounted in the Book of Esther are still matters of controversy, they are commemorated every year in the Jewish world on the holiday known as Purim. Many Jewish communities later instituted local Purims to preserve the memory of other occasions on which it was believed that Jews had been miraculously saved. Purim is a holiday of exile that recalls both danger and the always open possibility of salvation; it provides an occasion for all sorts of merry-making, which take an oddly cannibalistic form, with the preparation of special pastries such as Haman’s “ears” or “pockets.” The enemy is symbolically ingested, which renders him harmless and confirms the victory gained over him. Thereafter, the enemy is inside, not outside.

But it is not only those who want to destroy Israel who are the enemy. It is also those who reject, imprison, or humiliate it. The enemy is anyone who rejects the Jew as other — and the enemy is the other who rejects.

In Christendom, this rejection was, to begin with, theological. The Jews were those who had neither acknowledged that Jesus was the Messiah nor recognized his divinity. Their conversion to Christianity could open the way to acceptance of them, but only at the price of their disappearance. This disappearance was not, it should be added, universally desired, because the existence and survival of the faithful guardians of the Book known as the Jews counted as proof of the Christian faith. And the inferior status in which they had to be maintained was both punishment for their blindness and a sign of the authenticity of Christ’s message. But the gradual marginalization of the Jews, which went hand-in-hand with the rapid expansion of Christianity, led to their diabolization: a diabolization that crystallized and ennobled the hatred of which they were increasingly the targets. Soon the Jew had come to embody Evil. It was an Evil that could contaminate those who came too close to it, and it required that all the forces of Good be mobilized against it. The Jew was now a demoniacal, accursed creature whom the Christians strove to stigmatize, ostracize, and expel. The mythical figure of the wandering Jew arose naturally in the imagination of the “sedentary” Christian.

Wandering was the punishment meted out to a whole people, the new Cain, for the crime they had committed against Christ. It was a people that now lacked ties and roots, and that existed by virtue of this lack. Transformed time and again, the myth made its way down to the end of the nineteenth century. The modern wandering Jew, fitted out with distinct signs, continues to haunt people's minds. It sometimes happens, as well, that he is metamorphosed into the cosmopolitan Jew, the exotic Jew, the Jew from elsewhere, the pariah of modern times, unrelentingly targeted by anti-Semitic broadsides. His wandering has become consubstantial with his being. It is the destiny of his "race."

The laws about the purity of the blood that began to obsess the Iberian world from the end of the Middle Ages on established a new kind of discrimination between the pure-blooded Christians and the others, descended of Moors, heretics, or Jews, and forever marked by the impurity of their origins. In a sort of ideal society, even some of the humblest functions now had to be exercised by pure-blooded Christians. Blood became a new selective norm. The new Christian was the eternal prisoner of his genealogy. Whether they were the children, grandchildren, or great-grandchildren of the converts whose memory had obsessed the Spaniards from the fourteenth century on, whether they had chosen the path of Christianity because they were forced to or because they thought they had no other choice, all of them fell for good and all into the category of the impure. The impure were ostracized, marginalized, driven beyond the social pale. This obsession with the pure and the impure would endure down to the nineteenth century. The host of rules and regulations governing this selection based on "blood" were not abolished until 1773 in Portugal and 1860 in Spain.

Inspired by the anti-Judaism of the Middle Ages, modern anti-Semitism spread like an epidemic throughout a Europe that was now engaged in the race for progress. In the imagination of modern times, the Jew continued to be perceived as uniting all existing crimes and threats in his person. He was assumed to be the ultimate cause of all the problems besetting a society in transition, which sought to rid itself of its tensions by unloading them on him. Spontaneously, he became the target of the aggressive forces engendered by change, the focus for the resentment of all who had been left on the scrap heap. These powerful, widespread anti-Jewish feelings were easily transformed into political weapons in the hands of the ideologues eager to establish a new order. That is how the Nazis proceeded. The Jew, the absolutized other, soon molted into the racialized other. A number of eighteenth-century and nineteenth-century "scientific" theories made the Jew's "blackness" a subject of debate. His color betrayed his racial inferiority and morbid nature. He was black, and therefore the other par excellence. Was the Jew's Jewishness, then, a sort of disease? This is where we must situate the transition from symbolic discrimination between the pure and the impure to physical, hygienic discrimination between black and white, the healthy and the pathological. From now on, white was pure, black impure. Because he was "dirty," the Jews naturally aroused feelings of rejection. Being black, at the time, also meant being ugly. The Jews'

blackness was the sign of just how different they were. Were they not closer, when all was said and done, to the Africans than to the Europeans, who, in this, the heyday of colonialism, arrogantly proclaimed their superiority? To the blackness of the Jewish character were added the marks engraved on the Jew's flesh and visible in his countenance: the famous "Jewish nose." Many Jews, prisoners of the images forged by their enemies, did indeed hope to improve their noses (surgically!), imagining that this would enable them to improve their position in a society that assigned them limits beyond which they could not go.

In *Portrait of the Anti-Semite*, published in 1946, in the aftermath of a conflict that saw the extermination of six million Jews, Jean-Paul Sartre himself describes one of his Jewish friends in terms that would not have been disavowed by the very anti-Semites on whom he had declared war: "When I was living in Berlin, in the early days of the Nazi regime, I had two French friends, one of whom was a Jew and the other not. The Jew represented an 'extreme Semitic type': a hooked nose, projecting ears and thick lips."<sup>6</sup> Sartre adds: "However that may be, and even while admitting that all Jews have certain physical traits in common, it is not possible to conclude from that, unless by the vaguest of analogies, that they must therefore all possess the same traits of character."<sup>7</sup> "The slightly hooked nose [and] the protuberant ears"<sup>8</sup> seemed to him characteristic of the Jews, although his aim was precisely to avoid reducing them to a caricature. Curiously, then, the Jew as anatomical other emerges from descriptions produced by an intellectual who can hardly be suspected of the least hostility toward those he is describing.

Is Jewishness, then, indelibly engraved in the body, so that neither assimilation nor denial of one's origins is capable of effacing what cannot be effaced? Do the Jews' thick lips inevitably exile them from the West, surreptitiously bringing them closer to Africa? The Jews were people from another place, people of another race; their culture could create illusions, but not their features. Thus, after the racial categories of the nineteenth-century and the race laws had become things of the past, along with the anti-Semitic descriptions and caricatures that stigmatized the Jew by mocking his physical traits during the War and the Occupation, he continued to display, in the gaze of the other, the signs of the dissimilar, even in the immediate wake of the conflict and the disasters it had brought. Stamped as other to the point of caricature, he became an alien for himself. Thus Sartre contended that "it is not the Jewish character which provokes anti-semitism, but, on the contrary. . . it is the anti-semite who creates the Jew."<sup>9</sup> His very Jewishness was the work of the other. This was the ultimate denial of his own identity: he now depended entirely on the other's gaze, on this disapproving gaze that went so far as to bring him into existence through the very negation of his own being.

Trapped in the role of an other who was at once absolute and indistinct, the Jew, too, imagined his other, the "non-Jew." He would be called, in refined French, a "Gentile," a word, rather more inoffensive than not, that has given place to "goy." In the Bible, "goy" simply

means “people” or “nation,” often, although not systematically, in contradistinction to “Israel.” In the rabbis’ parlance, the term came to refer to any non-Jewish person, even acquiring a feminine form, “goya.” Usage invested it with pejorative, rather unfriendly connotations. There are, to be sure, goys and goys. Moreover, the goy of the Jews was obviously not strictly analogous to the Jew of the anti-Semites. He could even be assigned positive functions. Thus, in traditional Jewish societies, there were many familiar, everyday representatives of the indispensable, non-hostile other. There was the *shabes goy*,<sup>10</sup> whom the Jews of Central and Eastern Europe used to ask to perform certain tasks that they themselves were forbidden to carry out at any time during the weekly day of rest: for example, lighting or extinguishing lamps or a fire. There were the non-Jews to whom the orthodox Jews, then as now, were in the habit of selling, on the eve of Passover, all the food that they are forbidden to eat or possess until the holiday was over; of course, they would buy them back a week after selling them. There were, again, the non-Jews, Muslims in this case, who, in the Maghreb, traditionally brought their Jewish neighbors their first fermented meal after Passover, thus marking the beginning of the celebration of the very popular Maimuna.<sup>11</sup> The other was relegated to the realm of the forbidden, yet simultaneously made it possible for the Jew to avoid violating the Law. He reinforced the Jew’s Jewishness and allowed him, in one and the same gesture, to display his difference while sealing an alliance with the different.

The feminine version of the non-Jewish other, the *goya*, inspired, in her turn, the most contradictory fantasies. In Yiddish, she came to be called the *shikse*: the forbidden but fascinating woman, whose offspring, from a strictly orthodox standpoint, could not ensure the continuity of a Jewish line. *Shikse* comes from the Hebrew word *shekets*, which, in Biblical Hebrew, means “abomination” and is associated with the impure and the soiled. But the *shikse* is also a seducer; the Jewish imagination has managed to fit her out with the most beguiling charms, which have all the allure of the forbidden. This particular other is unsatisfied desire. She is strangely analogous, for once, to the Jewish woman as perceived by the non-Jew. She too is powerfully seductive: she is a dreamt of, terrifying otherness. In the works of Christian artists, she is incarnated in Biblical figures: Eve the temptress, Deborah the warrior, the cruel Judith, the bloodthirsty Salome. All are portraits of a desired, inaccessible, feared woman. Literature, too, gives them their due. In the nineteenth century, they continued to exercise their seductive power in novels in which they figure as courtesans and prostitutes, as woman of the sort one does not marry, but who arouse desire and provide the bourgeois household, benumbed by its comfort, what it lacks in the way of forbidden pleasures. These Jewish women are associated with the East, an imaginary place in which all pleasures and fantasies are allowed, in the freedom made possible by the exoticism of the far-away.

Otherness is refracted in an infinity of ways. If, in Christendom, the goy is the figure of the other par excellence, the Arab or the Muslim enjoys comparable status in the Muslim world. Here too, color indicates where the other stands. In the Ottoman Empire, the Muslim

Turk took his name from the color of Islam. Green, “*vedre*,” was what he was known as in the privacy of Spanish Jewish homes. Was he still considered a fellow creature, human being, another self? He was the other color. As for the Arab, in both Turkey and, later, Israel, he would be placed under the sign of the color black. The Jews were black for Western non-Jews; the Sepharadim were black for the Ashkenazim; for the Jews, the Arabs too were black. The color black removed you from the realm of the human in order to submerge you in a vision, a look, an imagination that classified things and nature as it saw fit. In the multi-ethnic Ottoman Empire, in which relations between the non-Muslim communities were fraught with multiple tensions, even the Armenians were given a name that associated them with the animal world. They were called “*ratons*,” rats. As for the Greeks, another minority engaged in fierce economic competition with the Jews, they were “the people who never smile.” They lacked the smile, that which makes human beings human.

The pioneers who disembarked in Palestine in the early days of Zionism wanted to adapt to a land that had long had mythical status. They intended to work the land so as to make it more fully a part of themselves. But, to become the land’s, they had also to appropriate the customs and clothing of the natives, which meant, in this case, the nomadic Bedouins. This time, the other would be co-opted. Thus it is that young Russian Jews, who were intellectuals to boot, could suddenly be seen in local dress. Photographs of the period show them decked out in garb that it would be hard to imagine today. And their mimetic ardor did not stop at that. They also tried hard to eat what their models did. The (re)construction of a Hebrew identity thus proceeded, paradoxically, by way of an imitation of the other’s identity — or, at any rate, what seemed to be his identity. In the case to hand, the other was the Bedouin.

For the founders of political Zionism did not, in contrast, always take into account the sedentary Arabs who had from time immemorial inhabited the lands they coveted. They quite simply did not see them. They refused to see them. As the Zionist enterprise unfolded, the tensions between the two peoples steadily increased. The creation of the state and the Arab defeats of 1948 and 1967 only deepened the abyss of hostility between the defeated, dominated Arabs and the Jewish conquerors. On the Israeli side, the 1973 Yom Kippur war reinforced the idea that the very existence of their state was the stake of this conflict. And, with each passing year, the two peoples established on the same land became further and further estranged from each other. They were enemies and foreigners for one another, and yet united as well, if only by their shared desire to live on that land.

It was precisely at this point that Amalek re-appeared. In the discourse of many right-wing Israelis, the Arabs are the new Amalek. The invisible other has become the absolute enemy, the enemy who means to wipe you out, the one with whom no compromise is possible. From this moment on, an implacable hatred legitimizes, in the eyes of certain people, the principle of total war. For the war against Amalek — against the Arabs — is a just, necessary war (*milhemet mitsva*). Since October 2000, the second Intifada has brought a long string of

murderous attacks and acts of brutal retaliation, sowing destruction and desolation on both sides. Decades of reciprocal delegitimization of the other have rendered his sheer presence intolerable. The other is perceived as nothing but a radical threat of destruction. He must himself be destroyed. Each party to the conflict dons, by turns, the costume of the executioner and his victim. The media cannot really account for this perverse spiral of violence. The Middle East will find it very difficult to recover from this apparently absolute abandonment of the ethic of the other. Hatred for the other, when it becomes as intense as this, is obviously suicidal. It is patently so in the act of the terrorist who sacrifices his life at the same time as others'. It is doubtless no less so, although this is not as easy to see, in a certain Israeli irredentism. Peace can only grow out of the recognition that the other is one's authentic fellow man. True peace, which is peace with the other, is also peace with oneself.

Peace with oneself, however, is precisely what modernity seems adamantly to refuse to accord the Jew. . . .

We read in Genesis that Sarah, Abraham's wife, demanded that he drive out Ishmael, the son he had by Hagar.

So Abraham rose early in the morning, and took bread and a skin of water, and gave it to Hagar, putting it on her shoulder, along with the child. . . . When the water in the skin was gone, she cast the child under one of the bushes. Then she went and sat down opposite him a good way off, about the distance of a bowshot; for she said, "Do not let me look on the death of the child." And as she sat opposite him, she lifted up her voice and wept. And God heard the voice of the boy. And he said to Hagar: "Come, lift up the boy and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make a great nation of him." Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water. She went, and filled the skin with water, and gave the boy a drink.<sup>12)</sup>

In their commentary on these verses, the ancient rabbis say that, when they saw this, the angels protested; they asked God how he could give water to one who, later, was destined to make Israel suffer. God is supposed to have answered that he judged everyone for what he is, no what he would become.

---

**NOTES**

- 1) On all the questions only briefly touched in this article, see Esther Benbassa and Jean-Christophe Attias, *The Jew and the Other*, translated from the French by G. M. Goshgarian, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2004.
- 2) Exodus 17:13.
- 3) Exodus 17:14.
- 4) Exodus 17:16.
- 5) See Esther 3:1 and I Samuel 15:8.
- 6) Jean-Paul Sartre, *Portrait of the Anti-Semite*, trans. Erik de Mauny (London: Secker and Warburg, Lindsay Drummond, 1948), p. 51.
- 7) *Ibid.*
- 8) *Ibid.*, p. 52.
- 9) *Ibid.*, p. 120.
- 10) Yiddish for “non-Jew for the *Shabat*.”
- 11) The Mimuna is a festival of spring and fertility celebrated by North African Jews. It begins at dusk on the last day of Passover and continues the next day.
- 12) Genesis 21:13-20.