

# HOW WE CEASED BEING JEWS<sup>1</sup>

*Jean-Christophe Attias*

The story goes that two men were walking along a road in the desert. One was carrying a goatskin full of water. If they both shared the water, both would die. If only one drank all of it he could survive as far as the next village. Ben Petora thought both had better drink and die, so that one would be spared the sight of the other's death. Then Rabbi Akiba came and taught ".....that your brother may live with you" [Leviticus 25.36]. Your own life is more important than your neighbour's. (TB *Bava Metsia* 62b)

What kind of commentary on this ancient quotation from the Talmud can one construct today? Can it help us to shed light on Jewish condition these days, or is it nothing but a digression?

I am pleading here for a digression. I will not deal with the effects of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in Europe, with the rise of a new anti-Semitism, the nature of which is still being debated... These are issues contemporary history, sociology or political science are better able to deal with than rabbinical wisdom. And on these issues you can rely on Esther Benbassa's analysis. My angle, here, although I will deal with no less

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<sup>1</sup> This is the English (abridged and revised) version of an article originally published in French: "Comment nous ne sommes plus juifs", *Esprit*, February 2005, p. 17-26. This article is available on [www.jeanchristopheattias.net/esprit022005.pdf](http://www.jeanchristopheattias.net/esprit022005.pdf).

burning questions, will be that of a Medievalist. And I will speak here as Jewish public intellectual – but still hopefully able to keep the distance his experience as a scholar has learnt him to keep... This is a rather paradoxical – but in some way typically French – position. I assume it.

So, onto the digression... Let us take up the challenge of digression. Because any thought of Exile requires digression, precisely. And let us cross the desert of Jewish identity, let us forget the Jews as social beings and their Jewishness as self-awareness. Because, in my eyes, one of the deep but hidden roots of the Jews' uneasiness these days, and sometimes of their panic, should be looked for elsewhere: in Judaism as a culture, or in what is left of it, from which the Jews, in a confused and painful way, often feel themselves exiled...

### *Desert and Thirst*

Desert is another word for Exile. A place to get lost and/or to return to one's roots, a place to sin and/or to find innocence again. It is not an "uninhabited place", not a place for an exclusive face-to-face between me and my God, as the Sinai Desert was for Israel and their God. If Exile is the crossing of a desert, it is the crossing of what Ezekiel called: "the wilderness of the nations".

Ben Petora and Rabbi Akiba invite us to evoke our world as a desert, that is to say, as an exile. To evoke our exile in this world. The State of Israel being part of this world, so of this desert, so of Exile. Rupture is everywhere, dispersion is the rule. The State of Israel did not put an end to the Exile, Exile remains its horizon. In spite of outward appearances, the State of Israel is not even the heart of a Jewish world devoutly turned to it.

There is no predetermined order, no hierarchy in the desert, no center, no periphery.

Ben Petora and Rabbi Akiba invite us to speak of an inhabited desert, where you are never alone, where there are always others. Where a brother always accompanies or meets you. A brother who is at the same time your enemy. Diaspora/Israel, Jewish people/nations, Israeli people/Palestinian people. These oppositions, though reassuring, are still too simple. The Diaspora, as a multi-polar reality, is not one. Nor is Israel. Diverse is the Jewish people, diverse are the nations, and diverse, the Palestinian people. Transversal are the frontiers, porous too, in spite of all walls. Everything seems to be fixed, when everything is shifting. And the Other is still here after being expelled. Here is the desert and the exile Ben Petora and Rabbi Akiba invite me to speak about. A desert and an exile which is both a place of life and death, of drought and miraculously springing water, of ignorance and revelation.

The Diaspora, especially in France, crosses a desert but refuses to be fully conscious of it. Its thirst is intense, maybe fatal, but it is not aware of its thirst. To grasp the nature of this threat, all that we have to do is to imagine a likely scenario – though not desirable in all its parts. Just to imagine a possible future. The last survivors of the Holocaust have passed away, the memory of the Holocaust has vanished as the first substance of Jewish identity in the Diaspora. Older generations have passed away, and traditional Judaism, mostly embodied in family practices, is disintegrating. Peace exists between Israel and Palestine... Anti-Semitism, even the new form of it, is declining...

What will one be left with at such a new stage of the crossing of the desert?

Of course, with a few “Jewish intellectuals”.

Some, less intellectual as they consider themselves more Jewish, after conceiving their role more narrowly, setting themselves up as “legitimate” spokesmen and ideological protectors of a “community” which they will have widely contributed to “invent”, and who, with the emergence of peace in the Middle East and the decrease of “judeophobia”, will get into a difficult situation.

Others, less Jewish as they will be more intellectual, will at best be able to quote Hannah Arendt or Emmanuel Levinas, but not to face, without mediation, the rough strangeness of the texts of tradition. And quite ready to hand over, without hesitation, to any emblematic figure – such as the late Benny Levy – the first duty of any Jew, whether intellectual or not: the study of the Torah.

What will one be left with? A culturally devitalized Diaspora, monolingual, more and more cut off from its sources. A Diaspora ignorant of Israeli culture and only able to enjoy it from the outside, and anyway never being in a position to experience it really, that is to say, to enrich it. A Diaspora which will have no other alternative than to assimilate progressively or to go over to religious fundamentalism.

So, what were the mistakes? Undoubtedly, it was not understood that one could not keep living on the sole memory of the dead while forgetting the religious and secular culture they had carried with them. Nor was it understood that the exacerbated memory of the Holocaust as a conflict between Europe and its Jews on the one hand, and the hypersensitivity to the Arab/Israeli conflict seen as a confrontation between the West and the East, between “Judeo-Christianity” and Islam, on the other hand, too often induced the denial of what has been and should still be the

foundation of Jewishness (and of Israeliness as well): its being at the same time European *and* Middle Eastern. In fact, two dimensions combined in the history of the Jewish people, as evidenced by some Jewish languages, by the wealth of the Judeo-Greco-Arabic cultural legacy of the Medieval era, or still later, by German Judaism and the Andalusian dreams of central Europe.

Sometimes it was too tempting to turn one's back on France (conceived of as an anti-Semitic and pro-Arab country), on Europe (exterminating and pro-Arab), and on the Middle East (anti-Semitic and potentially destructive), when, in fact, we are all, Jews *and* Europeans, from Baghdad and Cordoba, not simply from Athens, Rome and Jerusalem.

And it was probably a mistake, for the Diaspora, to share in a way the Zionist dream of exclusive self-centering, while forgetting the fundamentally cosmopolitan dimension of Jewishness.

It is also very problematic not to admit that, though the attachment to Israel is legitimate, in spite of the fact that most Jews will never settle there, it is illusory to expect from a blind allegiance one's salvation or that of Israel. It is no use offering the goatskin of water to Israel: it deprives the water that the Diaspora could drink from, and will never be enough to quench Israel's thirst...

### ***About Love and Justice***

It is also a mistake, maybe, to ignore what Rabbi Akiba's teaching can mean today. Leviticus says: "That your brother may live *with* you [at not *without* you]". "Your life is more important than your neighbor's". If only one life can be saved, drink up the water in the goatskin which you are

holding in your hands. You don't have to save your brother's life at the expense of yours. However, this lesson is paradoxical and challenging. Because we know from other sources that Rabbi Akiba considered the commandment "to love one's neighbour" as "a great principle of the Torah". How can one care for oneself and care for the other at the same time? It is only if this condition of strict balance is realized that the obligation to "love your neighbour as yourself" as stated in Leviticus 19.18 can be understood and observed as a genuine commandment – as a legal duty.

Who is the "neighbour" mentioned here, any man, your Jewish fellowman, only a just man, or even an enemy, the impious and the idolatrous? What is the meaning of "love" in this case, is it only a feeling and, if so, how can a feeling be governed by a commandment? In this context, is it a positive commandment to love or, in fact, first an interdiction to do wrong? What am I expected to do, to make as much effort for the other's well-being as for my own, or only to learn to wish happiness for the other as I wish my happiness, perhaps to learn to enjoy the other's happiness as I should enjoy my own happiness? What does "like yourself" mean? *More* than yourself, *as much as* you love yourself, or as much as you would like your neighbour to love you?

These debates have given food for thought to ancient and medieval Jewish exegetes. And if the commandment of "love your neighbour like yourself" has been traditionally regarded as the heart of the Law, the founding principle from which the whole Law can be inferred, at the same time, however, to consider love for one's neighbour a particular requirement of the Law – and not only the principle of the Law, inevitably imposes that its limits are set. Because it is essential to define as clearly as

possible the actions or abstentions which a just observance of that commandment implies, to define when one can consider the commandment observed or on the contrary transgressed. No surprise, then, to see many a commentator interpret the commandment of love less than an opening to something beyond justice and law, which could take the shape of an altruism or absolute love, than a more modest but perhaps more realistic exhortation to restore, step by step, and concretely, a relationship with the other, from the very beginning threatened and destined for injustice – as if it were more natural to hate the other and be hated by the other than love him or her and be loved by him or her.

So, for Rabbi Akiba and many commentators after him, the commandment of “love your neighbour” can function as a commandment only by keeping one’s distance, by taking account of feeling *and* keeping distance from it. Because feeling cannot be ignored but is not necessarily a good counselor, and as such it cannot be *ordered*. And above all the commandment of “love for the other” cannot precisely have the value of a commandment except if justice is its first horizon. That is why Rabbi Akiba also said “Your life is more important than your neighbour’s”. No sacrifice, no self-sacrifice – the Law and equity come first.

### ***About reconciliation***

So what does Rabbi Akiba exhort us to do? What narrow path does he mark out for us between love and justice, feeling and law, the fairness with which we must treat our brother and the fairness we must treat ourselves with?

*1. Your life is more important than your brother's...* Even though you are yourself the Diaspora and this brother the State of Israel – first, save yourself. Because you are not strong enough to save your brother – assuming that he is so much in danger that he needs saving. The Diaspora is not and, apparently, does not want to be a reserve of Jewish immigrants to Israel. It has two options left, collectively, to show the unfailing loyalty Israel expects from it. First, trying to influence in a pro-Israeli way (or more precisely in a way favourable to today's Israeli Government's policy) on the foreign policy of the States of which its members are citizens. It is not certain that in France, for example, communal leaders and organic Jewish intellectuals are really in a position to do that. And when this is probably the case, like here, you may wonder if such an action, in the end, will not be to the detriment of those who led it, or of these – “the Jews” – on behalf of whom – it will be claimed – it was led. If no concrete political action is possible, then the second option remains: trying, through a vigorous campaign in the media, to rectify the image of Israel. But nothing shows that such a campaign is likely at all to reach its goal.

Priority number one, in the diaspora, is not likely to be the defense of Israel at all costs, nor even the obsessional denunciation of anti-Semitism. The main challenge is simply cultural. Can the rising generations be offered a rich living, diasporic Jewish culture, as far from a dry fundamentalism as from a romantic Israelophilia, the main expressions of which are holidaying in Eilat or Netanya on the one hand, and ardently and blindly supporting a little-known country and a policy the complexities of which one barely understands?

*2. But try to live with your brother and see to it that he lives with you.* Have an authentic face-to-face with your brother. Don't live for him.

This is a fundamental ethical reminder which, in my eyes, seems to offer a second and essential project to the Diaspora. The exile, the desert, is a shared experience. This is not being by oneself, on one's own, but being two persons in one, being two persons oneself and two with the Other – as the travelers of the Talmudic story. It is up to the Jews in the Diaspora, to experience, this way, the exile and the desert as a right time and a right space to invent another loyalty. A critical one, a loyalty made of criticism and self-criticism. The only authentic loyalty, faithfulness, partnership. It's up to the Jews in the Diaspora to make it completely a duty towards Israel to remonstrate and warn as said in Leviticus 19.17 "...you shall not suffer sin upon your neighbour". It's up to the Jews in the Diaspora, to exhort Israel itself to live, in this way, its own exile and admit that not being fully achieved is the nature and probably the greatness of the Zionist project. Israel, though in its land, is still in the desert. An inhabited desert. Your enemy – the Palestinian – is your brother; try to live *with* him – and let him live *with* you.

And here it looks as if the divergent lessons of Ben Petora and Rabbi Akiba were reconciled, as if to save oneself there was no other way but to share the goatskin as Ben Petora advocates. There is enough water to save both of you. But both of you have to drink from the only one goatskin there is... Here, sharing out is the absolute and vital ethical commandment. And this time either you will live together or you will die together.

### ***About the Love of Israel***

A lot of Jews in the Diaspora have two fears: fear for the Jews, because of anti-Semitism, and for the State of Israel, because of the Middle East conflict. I, too, have a fear. But for Judaism.

If the Jews and the State of Israel are saved without saving Judaism – and Judaism is mortal – then – what shall have been saved? What shall one do with “de-cultured” Jews or “orthodox” Jews? What shall one do if one faces an unethical and violent state with which, finally, more and more Jews will find it difficult to identify themselves? What shall one do with a “religious” Judaism which both displays insensitivity to the Other’s suffering, here the Palestinian Other, and is capable of using Rabbi Akiba’s teaching itself to justify the sufferings Israel inflicts on Palestinian civilians – as if the legitimate care one has for one’s survival could justify an absolute contempt of the Other’s life and dignity?

Maybe Judaism as a culture is precisely the only thing left to be saved – and to save Jews. Most of it has to be almost entirely re-invented. In this field the Diaspora has a role to play. Is it still able to do it? Is it determined to?

We remember how harshly Gershom Scholem reacted to Hannah Arendt’s book about Eichmann’s trial and reproached her for a sort of indifference, a lack of sensitiveness, a lack of *Ahavat Yisrael* (“Love of Israel”). Scholem himself admits that this concept is “difficult to define”. Personally I will only say how skeptical I am about “feeling”, precisely. I take “feeling” prudently, particularly in days when something like a right to hate is claimed for too easily. In fact, by letting feeling prevail, one is betraying oneself.

The Jews of the Diaspora will not be able to keep making up for the loss of identity with excessive feeling – excessive love for a State which is shaped in the image of one’s dreams, excessive fear for a State strong enough to defend itself, excessive fear in front of an anti-Semitism which perhaps is not the greatest danger that one is threatened with. *Ahavat Yisrael* is not only the love of Jews. And certainly not the idolatry of a State. This might be the lesson one can draw from the experience of the exile and the experience of the desert. One does not cross the desert with no protection against thirst, one does not set off without water, without goatskins, without a friend. What water, in which goatskins and whose thirst needs to be quenched? The time has come to ask this question.

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