

The Memory of the Trauma of the Shoah in the Building of a European Identity

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Only for redeemed humanity has full possession of its past... Only for redeemed humanity can every moment of the past be cited.

W. Benjamin, *Theses on the Philosophy of History*

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In extreme situations we can allow ourselves to be destroyed by an experience, or we can repress it and deny it has any lasting consequences. But it is also possible to engage a lifelong battle to preserve awareness of it and integrate it in the memory. The most destructive of solutions is to conclude that reintegration of the personality is out of the question, or that there is no point, or both. In these cases the survivor perceives his life to be fragmented.

The preliminary condition for renewal of integration is first to recognize the seriousness of the trauma and its nature.

The problem arises when the break between the past and the present becomes a radical one. The experience of the *Shoah* has taken the paradox of Jewish life to its extreme limit. After the *Shoah* nothing could ever be the same again - in art, poetry, philosophy or theology.

This was a break in the collective consciousness, which the spread of knowledge helped to widen - a slow, and in many ways contradictory, process that could not be avoided in time or space.

In the crisis befalling the great narrative ideologies of the twentieth century, the memory of the *Shoah* has ended up by filling a gap of identity and belonging. In the name of impossible reparations, the role of *officiants* of a ritual that society has great difficulty in accepting has been entrusted to the Jews.

And so a new, multi-faceted complex situation has been created, where light is mixed with shadow - a situation laden with unresolved ambiguities and potential dangers.

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In the long term, taking on this ritual risks becoming a weapon to be used against the Jews themselves, since they are accused of getting some return on a position that other societies, with their own suffering, are excluded from.

The course the middle east crisis has taken marks the phases, the virulence and the forms of this perverse logic.

After Auschwitz, anti-Semitism may be expressed in an apparently respectable way only if Jews are targeted as a State - demonizing Israel and deforming the tragic events of a now century-long conflict in such a way as to make it unrecognizable.

To both its friends and its enemies Israel appears as a piece of Europe uprooted and replanted in the East. The real state of affairs is different and more complex than at first meets the eye. As far as metaphors - often used to cover up the truth and confuse - are worth, geographically, culturally and symbolically Israel contains both *East* and *West*.

The relationship Jewish culture has had with Christian and Islamic civilizations throughout history hasn't always been based on subordination, rejection and oppression, but has also meant cultural, religious and symbolic enrichment and the continual interchange that has enabled Hebraism to renew itself and survive.

The ambivalent attitude Europe has with regard to Israel is a symptom of the unresolved relationship the west has had with its own distant and more recent past.

Rejecting Israel and transforming it into a *pariah state* that is judged on the basis of criteria which would never be applied to any other country is a symptom of failed relations between Europe and the Arab world - between the Christian west and Islam. This isn't a question of the right to criticize this or that government, since criticism is the very salt of democracy. What is questionable is the form this criticism takes, the metaphors used and the images and stereotypes it feeds on.

Israel is a small island surrounded by an Arab and Islamic ocean. Befriending this sea and finding a way through to the hearts of these ocean dwellers is an absolute necessity for Israel. For Islam, accepting that this island exists and should continue to exist is the condition for breaking the chain of violence and grieving in which it is tragically caught up.

Let us try to imagine losing all of those who are dear to us. That from one day to the next the entire population of our home town has disappeared and that nine tenths of the population of our country has been violently wiped out. Let us try and imagine suddenly losing our closest relatives - brothers and sisters, parents, grandparents, uncles and aunts; all at once losing our friends from near and far, and having no one to share our grieving with - far from our homes, expelled from our work, hounded and alone in indescribable distress - and in the end not even being able to mourn our loved ones in any cemetery.

In trying to imagine this, and more, we might perhaps be able partially to understand what the Nazi genocide meant for those caught up in it - the terrible wounds in the consciousness of those who survived it, the mental torment it caused for those who managed to live through it but carry the burden for those who didn't, consumed by obsessions and a piercing, though infinitely irrational, sense of guilt.

Imagine that for every extension of our survival, for every few days or months we continue to live, someone else dies earlier, and that someone else is selected to die in special chambers designed for final extinction - that for every scientist's or researcher's useful contribution to the enemy, some other faceless human being has been included in the numbered list of those marked down to die or be killed every day in every month.

Let us try and imagine and maybe we can begin to understand what it really meant for those who were able to return to life after the experience of deportation and the concentration camps. We would then begin to perceive the intense violence of those who nowadays want to blame the victims for *a past that doesn't go away*, because they refuse to forget and because they want to cultivate the memory of what took place. We would cease to wonder why those who were directly involved in these terrible tragic events just can't forget. We would instead wonder how on earth they could continue to live and trust their fellow human beings and share hopes for a better future with those who pretended not to see or didn't want to look. How they managed to reacquire faith in the humankind and to keep faith, however much this must be at the cost of profound denial and self-censorship that does violence to the intellect and to belief .

In religious terminology, the *true great miracle* of recent Jewish history is the continued *belief in God*, in spite of Auschwitz, or paradoxically, *because of Auschwitz*.

Over the years I have wondered at great length just how Hebraism managed to survive the enormous catastrophe of Nazi extermination. What emotional resources have provided the life-blood necessary to get on with living again - what has stopped the children of the survivors from being drained of all desire to live and find enjoyment in life. Such questions are also meaningful in a psychological context and have wider implications for collective mourning processes. Other societies in different contexts have lost their will to survive and their cultures have disintegrated owing to outside pressures and from within. There are basically three answers, and to these I shall return later: the obvious fact that the war was won by an anti-fascist coalition, the cult of remembrance, and the creation of a Jewish

state. In the absence of the state of Israel and its significance for hundreds of thousands of survivors and exiles from Arab territories, Jewish society would have risked sinking into infinite self-mourning and any remaining regenerative impulses at the ending of the war might have dissolved.

We are used to thinking of death as something conclusive that marks the ending of existence. Death, in a biological or psychic context, is a process that starts much earlier. When life loses its significance, the immune system begins to suffer.

Repeated acts of massacre in Latin America and the complete lack of consideration for citizens' lives under dictatorships have sown their seeds in a history that goes back to much earlier times and whose psychological consequences have never really been collectively worked through. The tragic events of the Argentinian *desaparecidos* are merely one example of a mechanism which at various levels of society has continually tarnished the cultures of a continent that has never entirely come to terms with its original sin of violently destroying the civilizations that were already there. An entire cycle of history, from the *Reconquista* in Spain to the time of colonial expansion in the Americas, has never been properly processed in the collective psyche. The effects of the violence have been felt not only by those who were already living there but also by those who arrived much later. The sense of bereavement of those who fled their native lands in search of a new life in a new country could never really match that of those who were hounded out of their place of origin. A cyclical repetition of violence and destruction - a sequence of events of a schizo-paranoid nature - has never ceased to plague the public life of this continent [...].

The experience of the survivor

The experience of the survivor has two distinct and correlated phases: the initial trauma with its devastating, destructive effects on the personality on the one hand, and the possibly lifelong consequences on the other, which require a unique investment of resources to avoid succumbing to circumstances.

Surviving brings about

a vague but very special responsibility. It is due to the fact that what should have been one's birthday to live one's life in relative peace and security –not to be wantonly murdered by the state, whose obligation it should be to protect one's life- is actually experienced as a stroke of unmerited and unexplainable luck. It was a miracle that the survivor was saved when millions just like him perished, so it seems that it must have happened for some unfathomable purpose.

One voice, that of reason, tries to answer the question: "Why was I saved?" with "It was pure luck, simple chance; there is not other answer to the question"; while the voice of the conscience replies: "True, but the reason you had the chance to survive was that some other prisoners died in your stead." And behind this in a whisper might be heard an even more severe, critical accusation: "Some of them died because you did not give them some help, such as food, that you might possibly have been able to do without." And there is always the ultimate accusation to which there is no acceptable answer: "You rejoiced that it was some other who had died rather than you.

These feeling of guilt and of owing a special obligation are irrational, but thi does not reduce their power to dominate a life; in more ways than one, it is this irrationality which makes them so very difficult to cope with. Feelings which have a rational basis can be met with rational measures, but irrational feelings, more often than not, are impervious to our reason; they must be dealt with on a deeper emotional level.²

In extreme situations we can allow ourselves to be destroyed by an experience, or we can repress it and deny it has any lasting consequences. But it is also possible to engage a lifelong battle to preserve awareness of it and integrate it in the memory. The most destructive of solutions is to conclude that reintegration of the personality is out of the question, or that there is no point, or both. In these cases the survivor perceives his life to be fragmented. Such a condition of fragmentation and grieving is well represented in the novels by Isaac Bashevis Singer, who by no coincidence has continued to write in Yiddish, as if the intended readers - the millions of murdered people - were still alive. The survivor's life has gone to pieces and he is no longer able to regain control of it. The feeling of

² B. Betteheim (1959-1972), *Surviving and other essays*, First Vintage Books Edition, 1980, pp. 26-27.

impossibility to rebuild one's life rests on a background perception that everything belonging to yesterday's world and which gave life its meaning has been irretrievably lost and has vanished for ever.

The majority of others resort to the mechanisms of repression and denial to survive. Once they get over a terrible experience they try to get back to life as it was before, as if nothing had happened. But since it is impossible to forget, the nearest thing to denial is not allowing that experience to modify their lifestyles or their personalities. "As a matter of fact, to be able to return to life after liberation the same person one had been before was a wish fervently held by many prisoners; to believe that that could happen made the utter degradation to which prisoners were subjected more bearable psychologically"³

Resorting to these mechanisms is not exclusive the experience of the *Shoah*. It is a common reaction to the tragedies of life and history to remember events as historical facts while denying or repressing their psychological significance, because acknowledgement would entail reconstructing our personalities and modifying our world view. On the part of those societies who share guilt for the *Shoah*, one of the psychological mainsprings of a certain historical revisionism can be detected here: not denying the existence of the concentration camps or the scale of the tragedy, but pretending that everything is, or should be, as it once was and blaming the victims for not wanting to forget.

The survivors who deny that "their camp experience has demolished their integration, who repress guilt and the sense that they ought to live up to some special obligation, often to quite well in life, as far as appearances go. But emotionally they are depleted because much of their vital energy goes into keeping denial and repression going, and because they can no longer trust their inner integration to offer them security, should it again be put to the test, for it failed once before."⁴ These people's lives are like a house of cards, founded on underlying insecurity, an existential anxiety that eats away at life, where any trifle can spark off the sense of precariousness again.

Clinging to habits and routines, going on with life as if everything were quite normal, getting up in the morning, shaving and going off to work every day even if life has lost its meaningfulness can at times be the last resort against despair and the temptation to commit suicide.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 31-32.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

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Individual and collective struggle

The preliminary condition for renewal of integration is first to recognize the seriousness of the trauma and its nature. When generations commune, grieving and mourning are important parts of reconciliation and reconstruction. Separation is possible not only, as Freud claimed, because we let a loved one die so that we can live. It is also possible because we can be reconciled on other levels with the person we have lost, letting them live in us and projecting their memory in our lives and our routines and in our children's future. By recovering the past and liberating ourselves from any hurt we still feel, we open up a door onto the future.

When a loved one dies, we live, act and behave at first as if we ourselves belonged to the world of the dead - we retreat into ourselves, feel the need to be alone or in the company of those we feel strong affection for: our families and close relatives.⁵ The rituals evolved by every society are full of indications that signal to others our state of needing to ask for and receive help. In Jewish communities there is a custom of not shaving for a whole month in the case of the death of a parent, spouse or child. During the first week of mourning there is also exemption from daily prayer. The only obligation is to read the *Kaddish*, or prayer for the dead. In a normal situation, life begins its course again after a certain period. People find the energy within themselves to go on with their lives. But, we said... in a normal situation. By normal situation, I mean the protective presence of the family group and the wider circle of friends, relatives and colleagues.

In the case of individual mourning, when the situation allows, we let the people who are no longer with us live again inside us. It is possible to work through the process of mourning

⁵ On these aspects of human behaviour from an ethological and psychoanalytical point of view, cf J. Bowlby [1969] (1999). *Attachment*, 2nd edition, Attachment and Loss (vol. 1), New York: Basic Books.; Id., (1973). *Separation: Anxiety & Anger*, Attachment and Loss (vol. 2); (International psychoanalytical library no.95). London: Hogarth Press

not only because on one level the Ego chooses to live and lets the loved one die, but also because on other levels the loved one comes back to live on inside us.⁶ This is what happens in the normal course of mourning. When we can no longer bear it, we accuse ourselves of imaginary or real wrongs, in accordance with the logic typical of a primary process, and amplify these wrongs in our omnipotence. We become responsible for everything and hence must atone for everything for as long as we live. An instance of this is melancholy. Or else, in order to protect ourselves from this danger, we seek refuge in the most absolute denial, living a life that is no longer our own, wrapping ourselves in a normality that is no longer so, and transferring onto future generations the burden of unresolved conflicts and oppressive guilt. And those generations end up in the pitiful condition of continually asking questions of an enigmatic Sphinx and getting incomprehensible answers. Children are forced to become adults before their time and to act as parents to their own parents to avoid going to pieces completely.

In individual mourning the mediating function between the various demands of the psyche is performed by the ego. It is the Ego that has to deal with the unconscious burden of guilt and to set off the defence and reprocessing mechanisms. In collective processes the Ego interacts more with political, cultural and social movements and the individual working-through of problems with collective working-through processes.

The situation changes when mourning affects a whole community in an extreme way. Since there is no longer any direct support from a reference group, the working-through process of mourning needs much more effort because the community is even more on its own.

⁶ "Mourning is regularly the reaction to the loss of a loved person, or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken place of one, such as one's country, liberty, and ideal [...]. In what, now, does the work which mourning performs consist? I do not think there is anything far-fetched in presenting it in the following way. Reality testing has shown that the loved object no longer exists, and it proceeds to demand that all libido shall be withdrawn from its attachments to that object. This demand arouses understandable opposition- it is a matter of general observation that people never willingly abandon a libidinal position, not even, indeed, when a substitute is already beckoning to them. This opposition can be intense that a turning away from reality takes place and a clinging to the object through the medium of a hallucinatory wishful psychosis (S. Freud (1917-1915), S. E. XIV).

To survive, they had to forget and to cease thinking about what had happened, stop looking back at the past, preserve the apparent normality of their habits, go on living as if everything were the same as it was before - although of course nothing could any longer be as it was.

Things are easier for the young - their lives are projected towards the future and feelings of loss can be repressed and only re-emerge years later. For the elderly it is harder, especially if their very reasons for living are affected, along with their hopes for a different sort of life for their children. Giving up living, or worse, committing suicide, becomes a strong temptation and can be an extreme form of manifesting their feelings of humiliation and outraged dignity.

In these cases the course taken by individual grieving follows that of collective mourning, with the former falling back on the latter, resulting in a whole series of unresolved questions that take on the nature of an obsession: *Why me and not someone else? How can this be prevented from happening again?*

In such an extreme situation of grieving that involves a whole community even the religious view of life is profoundly affected: *Why did God allow this to happen? Where was God during the worst moment of loneliness?* Not everyone is able to reply that God was present with the suffering victims, in the silent cry of the person dying alone and abandoned, in the despairing wail of *I am the last!* - in the diverse and converging opinions of such secular thinkers as Levi, Bettelheim, Amery and Celan⁷ or such as Jonas, Frankl and Wiesel who have sought inspiration in texts of Hebrew tradition.⁸

⁷ Cf. P. Levi, *Opere*, 3 vols., Turin, Einaudi, 1958-1987; B. Bettelheim, *Surviving and other essays*, cit; J. Amery (1977), *Intellettuale ad Auschwitz*, translation by E. Gianni, Turin, Einaudi, 1987; Id. (1976), *Levar la mano su di sé*, Turin, Bollati Boringhieri, 1990; *On suicide. A discourse on voluntary Death*, Indiana University Press, 1999; Id., *At the Minds's Limitis Contemplation by a Survivor on Auschwitz and its Realities*, Indiana University Press; P. Celan, *Poesie*, translation by M. Kahn and M. Bagnasco, Milan, Mondadori, 1976.

⁸ H. Jonas, *The Concept of God after Auschwitz: A Jewish Voice*, *The Journal of Religion*, Vol. 67, No. 1 (Jan., 1987), pp. 1-13 (*Il concetto di Dio dopo Auschwitz. Una voce ebraica*, Genova, Il Melangolo, 1989); V.E. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, Washington Square Press, Simon and Schuster, New York, 1963 (*Uno psicologo nei lager*, Milan, Edizioni Ares, 1994); E. Wiesel (1958), *Night*, New York Bantam Books, 1982 (*La notte*, Firenze, Giuntina, 1980).

Although in normal instances of working through grief we get back to living again by reconciling ourselves with the deceased, in the case of melancholy, as Freud wrote, grieving becomes unending and projects its shadows over all the future. This is the situation that can be created when grieving affects an entire community - when violent destruction involves an entire group of people. In order to re-emerge from grieving, the future has to have meaning. But how can the future be given meaning again if the very possibility of a future has been cut dead?

In the case of a terrible catastrophe, denial can head in two different directions: the direction of relativizing or the direction of minimizing - amplifying other correlated events in order to drain the devastating effects of the catastrophe on one's thoughts and ideas and leaving things as they once were. Being unable to deny reality, we opt for interpretative denial. If this is the direction taken, one can even end up laying the blame on those who insist on remembering, making them guilty of not allowing the past to go away and accusing them of getting some return out of their remembering.

In order to deal with the collapse of an entire society after the Jews were driven out of Spain, the *Kabbalah* exerted great pressure on the Bible and the oral tradition to squeeze out new meanings from the scriptures that might give some sense to the tragic events of the expulsions.

The rending of the body of Israel, its grief, fragmentation and dispersal were symbolic of a process taking place in the world of the *Pleroma*. In this powerful conception, the suffering of Israel, its aspirations and dreams of redemption were all part of a process that involved the entire animal and vegetable kingdom. From the viewpoint of the *Kabbalah*, the suffering of Israel was part of a cosmic suffering involving the *Shekhinah* - the divine womb - the mothering of all creatures. The Jew enclosed in his ghetto, along with all other things, could absolve the function of liberating the divine sparks that were trapped in the cosmos after the breaking of the *Divine Vases*.

If a theoretical framework *doesn't* include grieving, it becomes saturated and unusable. Grieving is done by individuals and societies but in a certain sense it is done also by theoretical frameworks. These frameworks are affected by processes of working through grief, ritualization and memory reprocessing.

Discussion about the past is also a mask through which we look at the present and project the future. The conflict over memory regards the ability to gain through past experience, the

idea of society that we have and the future we want to give ourselves. This last is invariably a consequence of how we look at the past and project it into our aspirations and dreams.

The relationship between individuals and groups and their corresponding theoretical frameworks and beliefs follows the same mechanisms that preside over the relationship between people and institutions. In a "convivial" type of bond, the group and its representations may be apparently accepted and their authority acknowledged, leaving everything unchanged - as if a meeting between two people had never really taken place, with each remaining as he or she was before the meeting. The individual accepts the group's beliefs and the group recognizes that the individual has a role, but without anything actually occurring that gives life to the relationship or produces any mutual change. As Bion puts it, this is a type of relationship that doesn't produce hatred, but neither does it produce love, knowledge and change. In a "parasitic" relationship, the group and its representations are drained of value even when some value is apparently present. Hatred and envy are the dominant features. In a "symbiotic" type of relationship, the group's beliefs and its representations are taken seriously and subjected to a process of scrutiny that produces hatred, love and knowledge between individuals and the group.⁹

Memory as an area of conflict

In one of Singer's best novels, *Shosha*, the friendship between two Jewish children becomes a metaphor for unbearable grief. Arele, who was to become a famous writer, and Shosha, a pretty but retarded girl who has kept her childlike looks over the years, meet again years later. Their friendship gradually becomes a love that is as profound as it is unbelievable.

Shosha (Shoshele) confesses to Arele that she is sick and has stopped growing and he in turn reassures her he will never leave her and will do what he can to make sure she continues to live. Shoshele was a common name in the *Shtetla*, but also rhymes with, and shares the same letters as, *Shoah*. Arele is a diminutive of Ariel, which in Hebrew means

⁹ Cfr. W. R. Bion (1970), *Attention and Interpretation*, London, Tavistock Publications (*Attenzione e interpretazione*, Roma, Armando, 1973).

lion of God, the symbol of the tribe of Judah, from whom, according to a divine promise, the Messiah would eventually be born.

Shosha and Arele's coupling has symbolic value - a sacred marriage between messianic hope and nameless grief, between *Ani maamin* (the song of the deported) and the drastic reality of selection. Shosha is the image of the wounded Jewish soul - suffering that can find no peace, or unbearable grief. Arele is the image of the active masculine principle that desires to give back life to his beloved.

This theme frequently recurs in different forms - in patients' dreams, in stories and in poems-

The story of the Exodus teaches us to remember. Remember and you will tell the story. In the book of Exodus a story of slavery but also of liberation is told. The pharaoh's murderous plan to kill all Jewish children in order to wipe out the seed of Israel is thwarted by divine intervention with the death of all the first-born Egyptian children. The anguish of the Jews on the shores of the sea turns into a song of liberation that leaves the past's ghosts behind. The pharaoh and his armies perish in the surge of the water as the sea closes up again over them after allowing the children of Israel to pass. In the story of the Nazi extermination God is *absent*. In Auschwitz, this is the echo of the oral and written story - God *wasn't there* and the messiah didn't come.

Hitler in the end was defeated and the Nazis died in great numbers. They had largely succeeded, however, in carrying out their maddest plan to wipe out millions of Jews from Europe.

The introduction to the story of the ghetto revolts at the end of *Pesach's Haggadah* only makes the paradox of the religious history of Hebraism more explicit - delivering to humankind the idea of a good and just God who acts out of mercy for all creatures and suffers along with them, and then having to accept that the picture is precisely the opposite. Christianity in its origins found this condition to be so intolerable that it had the real nature of life starting only after death. In fact, however, it was the Christian population who built up churches and empires while the Jews dreamed in their ghettos of the coming of an age of peace for humankind in which the wolf would graze beside the lamb.

Not that there is any discussion here over the legitimacy of a choice that in fact is of great pedagogical and ethical importance, in that it connects the suffering of recent times with the age-old hopes of history. In the *kibbutzim* of the Israeli left, the story of the exodus has included also the toil and suffering of those who have reclaimed the desert and the marshes in order to rekindle hope. The millions of trees planted for all the children born and to remember their loved ones have also helped to reclaim the soul.

Ritualizing the most joyous and the most painful events is a primary necessity in any tradition. The problem arises when the break between the past and the present becomes a radical one - when codified tradition fails to make itself heard, or is in danger of doing so. In Jewish history this break has occurred many times and has led to a profound reinterpretation of religious tradition and God's role in history. Hebraism as we know it took shape after the destruction of the first Temple.

The challenge was to make it possible for a religious and national spirit to exist even in the absence of a specific geographical area, far away from the Temple and Jerusalem's places of worship. The sacred rules were set down in response to the danger of extinction and the need for reorganization. The fear that the tradition would be lost for ever was what led the Essenes to bury their sacred texts in the desert sand. The rabbinical authorities proceeded to draw up the *Mishna* to prevent any interruption in the handing down of the tradition, and the Synagogue definitively took the place of the Temple. Having been wounded in its heart, Hebraism proceeded to spiritualize its values. Heartfelt prayer took the place of sacrifice. History was later to be repeated with the drawing up of the Talmud and Maimonides' *Mishne' Torah*. History was again repeated with the expulsions from Spain and the tragic events of the Inquisition.

The experience of the *Shoah* has taken this paradox to its extreme limit. After the *Shoah* nothing could ever be the same again - in art, poetry, philosophy or theology. And not only because of the sheer scale of the tragedy, but because of the way the extermination was carried out and the place where it happened: in the heart of Europe and in the heart of its constituent symbols, and amid its sustaining ideology. The grieving affected the foundations of civilization and its religious symbols. After Auschwitz the world was no longer the same. The change affected theology and the very image of the divine.

This was a break in the collective consciousness, which the spread of knowledge helped to widen - a slow, and in many ways contradictory, process that could not be avoided in time or space. We need only think of what Primo Levi wrote. When this writer, from Turin in the north of Italy, first proposed to publish what was later to become one of the classics of the literature of the concentration camps, he was unable to find a publisher at all. The book was in fact published by a small firm at the author's own expense. Ten years were to elapse before the publishing firm of Einaudi reconsidered its previous refusal.

One may well wonder maliciously nowadays why such a thing could have happened - how cultured and well-advised readers, who were openly against fascism, could have refused to publish *Se questo è un uomo* (*If This is a Man*). But any contingent reasons, jealousies, personal feelings of envy or pettiness that might have led to any negative opinions about Primo Levi's book fall into second place if put into the perspective of more far-reaching events involving society in general. The delay in bringing Primo Levi's book to the fore in the Italian cultural scene was part of a process of the collective working-through of mourning which affected not only the Jews but also the general culture itself. Further years were to pass before *Il giardino dei Finzi Contini* (*The Garden of the Finzi Contini's*) was published, and along with it other important meditations and reanalyses of a bleak period of recent history.

The sheer scale of the tragedy led to silence among the more aware of the religious spirits. The eclipse involved the very concept of the divine. It was the image of God that had been violated in the concentration camps. If there was any miracle, it was that people continued to believe in good - in spite of everything and because there was no other choice. Herein lies the paradox of modern ethics. The important thing is not whether *God exists* but to live as *if He did*. It is no longer God who has to save human beings, as in the old triumphant theodicies, but it is mankind that carries the idea of God on its own shoulders and saves its existence in order to save mankind itself. In their own way, the mystics of the *Kabbalah* had understood this when they placed the meditation on the Name at the centre of their prayer, in order to join from below what had splintered at the top. *If you let me exist, recites an ancient Midrash, then I exist*. The person that formulated this was saying more than he could imagine about the paradoxes of the Hebrew world-view.

In the meantime the survivor generation has dwindled. After a long psychological repression involving the Jewish community itself, the *Shoah* has been raised to become a foundation symbol of what Europe and the world at large wished never to be repeated. The

Shoah has become the symbol of absolute evil and a rock of comparison for all other events.

In the crisis befalling the great narrative ideologies of the twentieth century, the memory of the *Shoah* has ended up by filling a gap of identity and belonging. In the name of impossible reparations, the role of *officiants* of a ritual that society has great difficulty in accepting has been entrusted to the Jews. And as defenders of such a ritual, they are also guardians of a *new orthodoxy* that sets out what the ritual consists of.

And so a new, multi-faceted complex situation has been created, where light is mixed with shadow - a situation laden with unresolved ambiguities and potential dangers. To cite only a recent ISPO survey, 36% of Europeans (and 34% of Italians) are of the opinion that the Jews should stop acting as victims and talking about the Holocaust.

But if the Jews don't participate in this ritual or *officiate* in it, the danger is that others might take it on and risk transforming it into a weapon to be used against them. If, on the other hand, the Jews take on this ritual, in exchange for the partial advantages deriving from their role of *priests* and *officiants*, then year after year this role becomes emptied of significance and ends up belonging to them alone. Western society can break free of an oppressive image and take its distance from it, thereby deluding itself that a lost sense of peace has been found again.

In the long term, taking on this ritual risks becoming a weapon to be used against the Jews themselves, since they are accused of getting some return on a position that other societies, with their own suffering, are excluded from. The longer the ritual is entrusted to the Jews the more the tragic memories belong to them alone. If they renounce this role, it might be taken on by others who might officiate against the Jews and use the idea of the *Shoah* to accuse them of perpetrating the same suffering on other societies that they themselves once unjustly underwent.

“How is it that a society that went through so much suffering can treat the Palestinians in the same way the Germans treated them?”: This question is usually raised after a debate or a film-showing and some poor person is put in the difficult position of having to defend himself or herself. Hypocritical aestheticism may be a justification in the case of others for evil done in the name of injustice and suffering undergone, but not in the case of Jews. This was the ignoble attitude seen in the case of anti-Israeli suicide bombers before European cities began to be targeted too.

In the case of Jews the procedure is the opposite. Even Israel's very existence, the fact that it was created, can become a sort of original sin that can only be erased by ceasing to exist. As in the teaching of the preconciliar Church, people are judged by what they *are* rather than what they *do*, and what is done is irremediably traced to a presumed original essence.

The course the middle east crisis has taken marks the phases, the virulence and the forms of this perverse logic. If the Arab-Israeli conflict gets any worse, the question may assume a virulent nature, to the point that the Jewish institutions arranging for witnesses to be sent to the ritual have adopted the sound habit of flanking the *priestly witness* with a young person who has been trained how to respond to such topics. The witness from hell can only talk about hell, while the political expert can instead answer all the other questions and deal with the distortions produced by misinformation and unawareness.

The ritual is safe, but not for ever. The danger has only been averted for the time being, and Jews have been put in the uncomfortable position of having to deal with a double form of blackmail: they are obliged to remember because others forget and are accused of placing others in a position of perpetual guilt.

If I don't do it for myself, who will, and if not now, when?, the learned writers of the Talmud teach. There is no hope that others might bear a burden if they don't feel it to be entirely theirs. If there is no other way, one should at least look out for any risks that may come up in the long term.

After Auschwitz, anti-Semitism may be expressed in an apparently respectable way only if Jews are targeted as a State - demonizing Israel and deforming the tragic events of a now century-long conflict in such a way as to make it unrecognizable. This new type of anti-Semitism comes full circle when Jews are accused of wanting to keep other countries in a state of permanent guilt in order to acquire privileges for themselves and to cover up any faults of Israel's.

Personal memory involves emotions and thoughts and consists of recollections and familiar stories. As an event gradually fades and is drained of ritual, as the ritual of remembering the Resistance movement in Italy has, those who don't recognize themselves as sharing western cultural values, or are actually openly opposed to western culture, risk identifying Jews

with the evils of this society. Hatred of Hollywood becomes irritation at the memory of Auschwitz. Hatred of the west and American power blends into hatred of Israel, and the fact that Israel is a small country surrounded by unfriendly countries and always exposed to the danger of destruction is overlooked.

The Dead Sea scrolls have been unearthed and are now preserved in a museum. In the event of a nuclear attack they would be buried again under the soil of Jerusalem to be kept safe and preserved for future testimony. The Israelis' message is clear. In the case of violent extinction, the memory will remain. All of which hints clearly about the what their fears and nightmares are about.

Zionism aspired to make Jews into a society “like any other”, and to build up a Jewish state just like any other nation. The paradoxical outcome of this enterprise has been the creation of a country which is *different* from any other. The *States of the Jews* has become the *Jew among States* and Jews have become its ambassadors throughout the world, not only in the eyes of its enemies, the old and the new anti-Semites, but also in the eyes of its friendliest supporters, who defend its existence.

Community traditions that were once devalued in the name of the *modern Jew* have now come to the fore and may even win an election that seems made just for them now that they can respond to the demands of individual community groups (Sephardim, Ashkenazim, Jews of Russian and Moroccan origin, etc.).

Israeli society is like a post-modern laboratory that has been experimenting with problems well in advance of modern Europe. The Europeans are unaware, and after long professing to give lessons to Israelis about how peoples of different origins can live together, they are now finding out to their distress that they are no further forward in matters of tolerance and that many of the problems they thought they had put behind them for good have reappeared with a vengeance - which shows how fragile human constructions are.

Between East and West

To both its friends and its enemies Israel appears as a piece of Europe uprooted and replanted in the East. The real state of affairs is different and more complex than at first meets the eye. As far as metaphors - often used to cover up the truth and confuse - are worth, geographically, culturally and symbolically Israel contains both *East* and *West*. It is *West* in the sense that the founding fathers of Zionism were inspired by a vision of the nation-state and the renaissance of nationalism, influenced by the dominant 19th century ideologies, and by taking a piece of Europe with them to the near east they had accelerated the phenomenon of political and national awareness. It is *East* because, in that "strip of motherland", separating east from west, Jewish civilization took shape and developed for more than a thousand years in close contact with eastern culture. Not to mention the many dispersions that have marked the Diaspora with its forced population movements and its creative inventiveness that have enabled it to survive throughout the centuries.

From this point of view Israel carries within itself the many easts and wests it has come into contact with in the course of its sorrow-laden history. It has been marked by them, but also transformed in a positive sense, and has never ceased to have dealings and interchange with other cultures even in the most difficult times. Their experience of being an oppressed or tolerated minority under Christianity and Islam has provided the Jewish culture with the opportunity to look into its own conscience and to share ideas, thus transforming its condition of weakness into a position of strength in order to survive even the roughest situations.

The relationship Jewish culture has had with Christian and Islamic civilizations throughout history hasn't always been based on subordination, rejection and oppression, but has also meant cultural, religious and symbolic enrichment and the continual interchange that has enabled Hebraism to renew itself and survive. The *golden period* of the Spanish Jews was also the result of a creative encounter between Jewish and Islamic civilization, just as the great explosion of creativity that took place when Jews came out of the ghettos was the result of a creative, though distressing, encounter with the cultures surrounding them. Auschwitz, and the present conflict between Israel and the Arab countries, are two tragic consequences of more recent cultural encounters, but history may well have taken a different direction. Not all of this was ordained and written down, nor is it necessarily the case that, at least in the case of the Jews, things should always be thus. In every generation the story of the exodus should be commented as if the liberation regarded that particular

generation. The choice between death and life regards every moment. The despair of reason can never cancel out the optimism of the will. The angel that appeared and countermanded the order to sacrifice the son already existed in the mind of God before the world came to light, and this will guarantee the world's existence. Not everything is necessarily ordained and spelt out: even in the most tragic situations there is a possibility of choice, however much this choice may be conditioned and limited by circumstances and wider historical processes.

The debt owed by the West to Israel goes beyond the tragedies that caused such bloodshed in the century that has just ended. By defending Israel's existence Europe is in fact defending the only credible image it has of a possible future. The ambivalent attitude Europe has with regard to Israel is a symptom of the unresolved relationship the west has had with its own distant and more recent past. The temptation of some political sectors to let Israel go and abandon it to its fate is a grave symptom of abandonment of political responsibility - a sign of serious misunderstanding of the question at stake now in relations between civilizations and cultures, countries and nations, democracy and coexistence, which may lead to total moral collapse.

Rejecting Israel and transforming it into a *pariah state* that is judged on the basis of criteria which would never be applied to any other country is a symptom of failed relations between Europe and the Arab world - between the Christian west and Islam. This isn't a question of the right to criticize this or that government, since criticism is the very salt of democracy. What is questionable is the form this criticism takes, the metaphors used and the images and stereotypes it feeds on. Not to mention the falsification and distortion of facts. As is demonstrated by the worrying developments of Iran's nuclear policy and its attitude to Israel's right to exist within safe, internationally recognized, borders, guarantee of safety for Israel is the very condition for any understanding between the West and Islam. It is the condition for any historical, political and moral settlement of the conflict that is causing such bloodshed in the region. Without Israel any understanding would be completely unthinkable. Europe and the Arab world, the West and Islam, can only get back on talking terms if Israel can be at peace with the Arab world and be present to bear witness to both Arab and Jewish grieving.

He who lives on an island must befriend the sea, goes an ancient Arab proverb. Israel is a small island surrounded by an Arab and Islamic ocean. Befriending this sea and finding a way through to the hearts of these ocean dwellers is an absolute necessity for Israel. For Islam, accepting that this island exists and should continue to exist is the condition for breaking the chain of violence and grieving in which it is tragically caught up.

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