

I. PUBLIC LECTURES

ISRAEL, THE LAND AND THE SACRED

Through so many centuries of exile, what has the land of Israel represented to the Jewish imagination?¹ The memory of ancient glory. The horizon of an expectation. The improbable site on to which is projected a hope for better days. Somewhere between heaven and earth, and more often nearer heaven than earth, Zion beckons and gives meaning. There, one day, the restoration of this fractured world will be complete; there, one day, the Jews will see the end of their tribulations. One day there in Zion or maybe here, perhaps today. While waiting for the dream to be realised, it is always possible to imagine that the place where one lives is already like a Jerusalem in exile, and like the provisional extension of a land of Israel that is inaccessible. Amsterdam is the Jerusalem of the North, Sarajevo is the Jerusalem of the Orient, Tlemcen is the Jerusalem of North Africa, Vilna is the Jerusalem of the East... One person's Jerusalem is not another's. Each Jewish group has its own, which it places above all others. Of course, such a land does not replace the real and distant one, but merely allows the group to be patient, to bear exile, internalised but never totally accepted.

Not far from Istanbul, two Jewish villages face each other, one on the European shore of the Bosphorus and the other on the Asian shore. Each still has its own cemetery. The most pious and devout folk of the European village would prefer to be buried with their neighbours on the Asian side of the Bosphorus. Their bodies would thus cross the narrow strait to rest over there, opposite, in almost holy soil, just a little nearer Jerusalem. Did they thus imagine themselves, on the day of resurrection, arriving more quickly and surely in the land of Israel? Was this a shortcut? At least this is how legend would have it...

Israel, Promised Land, Holy Land, the consolation of exile. How can we describe it? How can we touch the dream without distorting it, decode it without being submerged by the emotion that evoking it unfailingly arouses, and try to understand that emotion itself? The task seems arduous. And still more so these days than formerly, now that the dream is incarnated and has become reality. Moreover, this reality has by no means killed the dream. Different from what it was, imperturbable, throughout the ages, the dream does not cease to haunt the minds of Jews of the Diaspora as well as of Israelis.

A few words about its medieval roots will make it easier to understand some of its contemporary metamorphoses.

¹ This lecture briefly evokes some of the issues extensively dealt with in our book *Israel, the Impossible Land*, trans. Susan Emanuel (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003). Complete bibliographical data can be found there (pp. 270-86).

Doomed to have no political power, both in exile and dispersed, the Medieval Jew stands on the periphery of the world he lives in. Long ago the land of Israel ceased to be a place where a reunited people could exist. And nearly as long ago, it ceased to be the centre of a Diaspora perceived like a boundary. The Medieval Jew has no means at all to assert his rights to a land which through the epic of the Crusades, is the heart of spiritual aspirations and imperialistic ambitions of the two great religions, daughters of Israel, stressing at the same time the decline of its former owners. This alienation of the land, now under one rule, now under another, even though none seemed destined to settle for long or beget a real rebirth, naturally evokes the alienation of the people expelled from it, it, too, humiliated and depending on the goodwill of various and inconstant masters. The situation of Israel and its land, bearing the marks of exile and expropriation, also seems to constitute a historical sanction of the theological pretensions of Christianity and Islam. So, how can we dare to claim, in spite of all appearances, that the mission of Israel and its exclusive link to its land are still continuing?

To organise an efficient spiritual resistance to the hard facts of history is a very arduous task in the cultural world born from the meeting of Islam and the philosophical and scientific heritage of Ancient Greece. From now on, Jewish and non-Jewish thinkers focus their attention on abstract and totally timeless themes, God, his essence and his existence, the Creation, prophecy, good and evil, reward and punishment, etc. Moreover, the conception, currently admitted by philosophers, of the Divinity and its relation to the world (an impersonal relation, governed by a system of universal and immutable laws) makes the Jewish theme of God's choice of one people and one land, quite problematical. Thus the struggle is being organised on several fronts. The loss of the physical contact with the land is compensated with its idealisation. Far from being satisfied with the accumulated treasures of Jewish traditional culture, and even though they keep on studying them in depth, some great masters of Jewish thought, philosophers or kabbalists, will endeavour to build up a theology of the land, likely to repel, successfully, the attacks of their Christian and Muslim counterparts, even by trying to make use of the scientific, climatological and astrological knowledge or beliefs then shared commonly by the medieval world.

A real territorial exception, the land of Israel is far more than a territory. It is the image and the sign of the Jewish exception. Its intimate link to God sends back to God's intimate link to Israel. Any change of the relations between Israel and its land is nothing but the clear sign of a change of its relations with God. However, no alteration of this kind is irrevocable and definitive. And none is as deep as appearances seem to tell. The land is a person endowed with will, which may be negative or favourable, now accepting now rejecting its inhabitants. Those who live on it, breathe a pure air and its dust for those buried in it has an expiatory power, comparable to that of the altar of sacrifices. Its successive conquerors did not manage to put down roots, which reveals its positive resistance to any illegal

takeover. The land of Israel is hit by nothing but what it accepts to be hit by. Essentially pure, nothing could possibly stain it. The destruction and the oppression of a foreign ruler only has a limited impact on it: perhaps the divine impulse from above is no more as intense as it used to be, but evil has no grip on it, and it has itself the power to reject impurity.

To consider that the effects of impious acts committed in the Holy Land through centuries are non-existent or fundamentally inessential is a way of implying that the relation of history to it, is like water off a duck's back. The land of Israel is no more in history, but out of it. The rags of spoliation and destruction mask an essential, divine and unchanging land whose present troubles by no means affect it and which, some day, once again, is to reveal itself in all its untarnished glory. Indefinitely idealised, the land medieval Jews are dreaming of is this land toward which they turn to pray thrice a day. But it is also far more than that, and really something else. The more it is perceived as holy, the more it is lived as different – and as terrible.

The modern Jewish Zionist-inspired ideology, of course, tended to claim that after destruction and dispersion nothing in fact had jeopardised the Jews' relationship toward the Holy Land and that this land had never even been weakened by some symbolisation of the sacred space or by the transfer of this sacrality to whatever space or institution. However, the simple reading of texts inevitably makes such a simplistic axiom questionable. The longing for the lost place, as nostalgia, as the awareness of a lack, could not feed on itself alone. This desire, in fact, was never completely unappeased. The powers of dream, the artifices of allegory made Zion present at every time and everywhere. And there lay the paradox: the more one thought about the land, the more one forgot it. Even more: having it continually on mind, keeping on naming it was perhaps the best way to forget it...

By associating it with such a superterrestrial reality, intellect agent or *sefira*, philosophers and kabbalists work towards what can be called a 'surrealisation' of the land of Israel, and at the same time, contribute to its 'derealisation'. The moment it becomes a divine entity, the upper Holy Land is necessarily much more 'real' than the inferior material world where we live. On the other hand, because its essence comes from the celestial, with which it is in a privileged touch, the lower Holy Land may lose in the same proportion, every 'reality', this time in the terrestrial sense of the word. Then it is a short way from idealisation to allegorisation, from the temptation of metaphysics to the seductions of metaphor. An easy way to go, which makes the land less and less itself to be more and more something different from itself. The words one uses to name it traditionally (land, Jerusalem, Zion) end up referring first and foremost to mystical or philosophical, perfectly independent, realities. So, the land is nothing but a signifier with many signified elements, which have or have not direct or indirect links to the primordial signified element – the land in the terrestrial sense.

The intensity and the depth of this idealisation of the land, of course, changes from text to text, from author to author, but also from one era or cultural area to another. Still, it is not easy to determine the link between

these attitudes and the physical living conditions of the Jews. Is the sublimation of the Holy Land the only way, via the dream, to escape the hardships of an exile which, besides, one has no means to end? Or is its metaphorisation the result of an adaptation to the exile the oppression of which would be less heavily felt whereas more harmonious relationships would be established with non-Jewish populations? It seems difficult, a priori, to subscribe to such a mechanistic theory. Furthermore, the vast majority of sources traditionally examined are scholarly sources, the representativity of which, on the scale of a Jewish society in its globality, is delicate to measure... It is doubtful that the average Jew had ever had an idea of the subtlety lying in those cultural productions. How can we also appreciate the real impact of a sermon that a scholar addressed to an audience of ordinary believers? How can we know how deep in themselves these people could internalise the contents of the liturgy they had access to? As far as the words themselves were understood effectively – Hebrew being only a language for studying and very unequally grasped – did those words do more than shape a collective unconscious, usually inactive, than keep an indistinct wait alive, counterbalancing daily problems with a more or less stereotyped hope?

Anyway the medieval Jews never had to choose simply between, on the one hand, dream or abstraction and, on the other hand, the physical land – between on the one hand the constructions of intellect or imagination and on the other hand emigration. The choice was not either simply between a strictly local attachment to the Holy Land and a timeless, unreal representation of the Holy Land. Few genuine religious aspirations can easily put up with an excessive mystical, geographical or temporal proximity as well as with an excessive distance of the object longed for. The land of Israel smells of Eden. Indeed, it is itself Eden. And to be visible from this world without being completely part of this world, to keep hope alive and already offer some consolation, Eden must be neither too near, nor too far, neither too easily accessible, nor quite out of reach. The land of Israel is also the heart of the world. It is the foundation on which is built, the axis about which it is developing, it is the orientation of the sacred space. And to be visible from here without being really here, and to give the believer the mark which he needs, this centre must be neither too near, nor too far, neither too easily accessible, nor quite out of reach. In both cases mediation is possible. It is even necessary.

In some contexts, particularly in the Hasidic world, the Just, the Tsadik will be the mediator. His only presence will turn the place where he lives, into a real land of Israel, distant enough and close enough. And when he will go to Lublin, the follower of Jacob Isaac of Lublin will simply have “to *imagine* that Lublin is the land of Israel, that the master’s court is Jerusalem, his room the Holy of Holies, and that the Shekhinah [the Divine Presence] speaks through his mouth.”² To ‘imagine.’ So would that always be the key

² Quoted by Arthur Green, ‘The Zaddiq as Axis Mundi in Later Judaism’, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 45 (1977), pp. 327–47.

word? To see Lublin, to dream of Jerusalem, isn't it also a way of dreaming Lublin? This double dream and this phantasmagoric confusion of "the world here" and "the world over there," however, are precisely what, until the contemporary era, has helped the Jewish communities of dispersion to feed on something more than dream - and so to appease - a longing for Zion both fragile and essential for their self-consciousness.

The Jew of the Middle Ages seems doomed to resolve a persistent tension between his being unable to be really where he is, and where quite often, his right to be is not completely recognised, and his being unable to give up being where he is not, no longer, or not yet. The natural place he has a strong desire for and where he thinks he has a chance of feeling at home, the place he agrees to be defined by, the medieval Jew, spontaneously, names it Jerusalem, Zion, or land of Israel. Sometimes these will be Jerusalem, Zion and the land of Israel here below, but perfected, magnified, glorified, suspended in time, visible images of his own secret glory, signs of a privilege he has dreamt of and which reality has denied to him. But these will also be, sometimes, homelands of another sort, and in a way more accessible: the cosmic power the world here below depends on, a state of consciousness of a man freed from the chains of his earthly condition, the town where lives the Master who teaches the Law and makes God's word heard...

Attractive as it was the dream could not, by itself, govern the conscience of the medieval Jew. In fact, Judaism is not a theology cut off from reality. It is praxis too. It also states the Law; it first states the Law. And, concerning that, Jerusalem and the land of Israel are not objects or supports of representations. Indeed, the Jew of the Middle Ages cannot forget that the destruction of the Sanctuary, the fact that he is physically far from the ancestral land, prevent him from keeping a great number of essential rules of the Torah. Oppressed by a foreign ruler, who imposes his laws on him in many areas of life, hasn't he also become a mere shadow of himself, since he is now deprived of a most important part of his Law? Is a Jew in exile who never fails to observe all commandments except those to be followed in the land of Israel, really a stainless Jew, a Jew in the full meaning of this word? Or isn't that a temporary solution, a stopgap, finally not a very satisfactory compromise? The keeping of commandments which only the coming of the Messiah and the reconstruction of the sanctuary will realise does not certainly depend on him. But won't he try spontaneously to go half way, and settle in the Holy Land to fulfil at least the commandments linked to the land which, as for themselves, on the contrary and right from now, depend on him alone?

Exile has never been able to wipe the land of Israel out of the Jewish juridical normative horizon completely. Anyway it could not have done it without ceasing to be exile. Still, one must be careful in this respect as well. No anthology of mishnaic or talmudic dicta could by itself justify the idea, dear to religious Zionism, that the Judaism of exile would have always, and on principle, claimed that the obligation to live in the Holy Land is an absolute primacy. It is enough to put these declarations back in the partic-

ular moment they appear and to study the exegeses produced on them to discover that the logic of rabbinical hermeneutics and the rabbis' realism have managed to draw the hidden complexity of apparently simple rules, so as to limit and sometimes to invert their meaning...

Any stand taken about the nature of the relationship of Israel with its land during the time of exile entails a stand about the nature and the role of exile itself. And the theology of exile may lead to any reversals. For some, punishment of a sin, it becomes a sin itself for others. In one case, going up to the Holy Land may look like a rebellion against the divine sanction, in the other, on the contrary, it is the accomplishment of a positive order. And when, between these two extremes, it is neither punishment nor sin, but a mission, exile has a highly dialectical relationship with the land of Israel. A relationship which, eventually, may mix up the borders – or which may be thought of as a complementarity, the Holy Land and the Diaspora each playing their own role, essential in the dynamics of the redeeming process. A relationship which, in every case, never considers *aliya*, the 'going up' to the land of Israel, a slight decision. This one, in fact, is rarely encouraged, most of the time it is reserved to a small number, indeed, even quite simply forbidden. As the love of the land and the assertion of its holiness are not at all sufficient reasons to go, so the fact itself of going, does not necessarily presuppose the negation of exile. The relationship between *aliya* and messianism is also, to say the least, ambivalent. There may be messianism without impulse of *aliya*. Vice versa, there may be *aliya* without messianic fever. Furthermore, for many, the *aliya* is precisely a tolerable step only if it is not coupled with a messianic fever. Even though *aliya* and messianic fever are associated, this does not necessarily mean that emigration is looked at as a way to hasten the end – it may be nothing but the desire 'to be there' and get ready to welcome redemption, by doing positive acts.

Anyway, emigration was never for a Jew of the exile, the only hope to express, concretely, his attachment for the real holy land, nor the only means, for Diaspora, to be really in touch with Palestinian Jewish communities. From the 16th to the 20th century, the emissaries whom Jewish institutions and communities of the Holy Land regularly sent in Diaspora to raise funds, played a most important mediating role. Their physical presence incarnated the dream, and offered the Jews of the exile an opportunity to feel something of the reality of the land of Israel. But besides, they were for the communities the main means to get in touch with 'other,' 'different' Jews – so when a Sephardi messenger was travelling all over Lithuania or when an Ashkenazi Jew was going up and down Yemen. The long journeys of emissaries, their incontestable prestige and the needs they voiced, showed how the land of Israel and Diaspora depended on each other, while consecrating the centrality of the Holy Land – essentially, however, a place of study and prayer. Their action caused the land, the imaginary one as well that which needed money to fulfil a double and ambiguous function between the assertion of the unity of the Jewish world and the revelation, in a feeling of strangeness, of its irreducible diversity.

Yet, the best way to discover Palestinian realities, without emigrating for all that, was to go on a pilgrimage, or read pilgrims' records. But in that case too, imaginary stories and stereotyped descriptions mix with the traveller's own impressions – and obviously keep the reader off reality. Moreover, except for the Western Wall and the cave of prophet Elijah on Mount Carmel, all holy sites visited are tombs. It is sure that these tombs project a certain number of temporal reference points on to the space explored. They are the geographical, earthly inscriptions of founding events of the history of Israel on its ground – but outside its ground too. As most are saints', prophets', scholars' tombs, ancient or more recent, that geography bears the mark of a history which, in fact, has no intrinsic link with the place since it is a history of the Jewish science beyond space and time data. The visit of those tombs itself is called separation, divorce (*gerushin*) by the kabbalists because the pilgrim gets rid of, breaks off the relations with this world, and becomes holy to honour the Divine Presence staying there. The tomb: a place, to keep out of the place... 'Heaven Gate,' the holy land of a pilgrim is essentially an underground reality. Because his concern, what he is looking for and can never, really, find on the soil he is walking on, is the essence of the land of Israel, that it is to say, a symbolic land, conveying a sense, buried in the depths of the earth or nestling high up in heaven. An essence which evokes, at the same time, death (underground) and survival (in the skies) – never the simple life here below, on the earth and under the sky. The visit of tombs and caves marks the earthly itinerary of the traveller and strangely anticipates the underground itinerary which, according to an old tradition, the dead body of a Jew buried in Diaspora is to follow in the time of Resurrection, when the Lord will help it to go from cave to cave as far as the Holy Land for a rebirth over there.

Better than any analysis, maybe, it is finally a short tale by Israeli writer Shmuel Yosef Agnon, drawing on traditional Jewish sources, which best expresses the nature of this fascinating ambiguity of the links which Israel in exile has been building up with its land, throughout the centuries.³

The story goes that an old sick man took his doctors' advice to drink goat milk. But the goat he bought himself, disappeared from time to time; all investigations were vain and her hiding place never discovered. She just came back by herself, with her udder full of a "sweeter-than-honey, tasting-of-paradise" milk. To solve this mystery, the old man's son devised a trick: he fastened a rope to the goat's tail, and as soon the animal set off, he took hold of the rope and followed. The goat led him to the entrance of a cave where a long underground trip began, lasting "one or two hours, or perhaps, one or two days". At the far end of the tunnel the young man soon discovered a wonderful land which he identified very easily: the land of Israel. So he understood that the goat gave such delicious milk because she fed there, nearby Safed, on pulpy and sweet carobs and quenched her thirst in

³ S. Y. Agnon, 'Fable of the Goat' (trans. B. Rubin), in *A Book That Was Lost and Other Stories* by S. Y. Agnon (New York: Schocken Books, 1995), pp. 188-91.

the springs of the Holy Land. When seeing men very much like angels welcome the holy Shabbat, the young man decided not to return home. He took some special ink – used by the scribes to write the scrolls of the Torah, wrote a note to his father and slipped it into the goat's ear, hoping that his father, on the return of the goat, would stroke her, and that she would then move her ears letting his note fall. Indeed, the goat did return, but she did not move her ears, and the old man was in despair, believing that his son was dead, devoured by some wild beast on his way. In a fit of anger he had the goat destroyed – and exactly then, the letter fell out. The old man read it and realised that he had new and more serious reasons to lament: then, he could have reached the Holy Land “by one bound”, but as the goat was dead and his guide had vanished, he was irremediably doomed “to waste his days in exile”! Since that time the entrance of the cave has been invisible. And there is no more short cut to the land of Israel. As for the old man's son, “unless he is dead,” he is enjoying a peaceful and happy life over there...

The old sick man, perhaps is Israel, and the milk that helps him not to decline, the carnal and ethereal dream of a remote land. Still, this land, though it is real, is an imaginary land, in exile at the far end of time and space, in a time which is not a time, in a space which is no longer a space. Its inhabitants are already angels and only a humble goat has kept the instinct, both natural and mysterious, which permits her to reach it. The underground route, which alone leads to it, has something to do with death and resurrection. And if its access, for the time being, is practically forbidden, for sure that must be the result of some fault. There only remains in the old man's hands – in Israel's hands – this note written in the ink of the sacred scrolls: the Book which speaks of the land and promises it...

In the contemporary era, a small part of the Jewish people, as if suddenly rejuvenated, will no more be satisfied with the promise. It will try to make the dream come true. To turn politicians' and settlers' action, the ‘shortcut,’ at last, into an eagerly desired resettling. Far from being a rupture alone, however, this modernity of the land will keep (on) feeding on revisited images of its ancient and medieval times. Galvanised by the invigorating exposure to ideologies and nationalisms of a Europe in full boom, will the Jewish activists of the new era ever be able to totally exorcise the attractiveness of the Book, and to open without it, for them, an improbable way to an improbable land? In the 19th century, a turning point occurs. While the wave of orientalism is sweeping over the West and the ‘Eastern Question’ is passionately debated, a renewed interest for this piece of land, nearly forgotten since the Crusades, emerges. The Jews themselves do not feel unconcerned, even though a new era of citizenship has opened to them, and just in the time when some claim that Jerusalem is where they are, and that there is no other Zion for them but the countries which emancipated them. Marching nationalisms in Europe during those years begin to mark minds, in certain circles at least.

However, the land of Israel, chosen as an actual place of residence, will finally be recognised by a few minds, in a very progressive and uncertain

way. Its soil looks very unsteady and its frontiers on the move, and, in fact, the debate which it arouses will not even cease with the foundation of the State, far from there. Always unstable, attractive and strange, elusive, vanishing, it was not that easy to reconquer it. In the eyes of the secular theoreticians of political Zionism, it was primarily a project or an instrument rather than an aim in itself, and still less a duty to act or some piety to observe. It is incontestable that Zion, as a symbol, as an abstraction, became a strongly mobilising theme for the national Jewish movement. Only this word could awaken a powerful enough echo to bring together a large number of Jews all over the world, and to engage them in a political, social and economic collective action – whether they participated themselves as emigrants in the foundation of a new society or merely gave their material and moral support to the movement. Other choices were thought of, such as Uganda, Northern Sinai, Argentina, and the Soviet Jewish Republic of Birobidzhan, which were highly controversial inside the Jewish nationalist movement. Nevertheless they were excluded as non-Zionist. And yet these territories may have seemed easier to acquire, and their colonisation looked less problematical, but they never were able to compete with Palestine. Political Zionism had developed at the dawn of the great period of European colonialism, at a time when Europe considered it had a natural right to territories, quite outside its geographical and cultural sphere. But Zion had not been chosen as a land for Jews in the same way as other lands to be settled: that is, for its advantages, natural resources, or political accessibility. Zion had been chosen because it was the only land able to arouse, in the Jewish world, the enthusiasm necessary for a successful policy of immigration, in every aspect different from the waves of immigrants heading to North America with their individual and family salvation in view. Without Palestine, Zionism was bound to fail as a national project. To build a new society from a people dispersed all over the world, ethnically and culturally heterogeneous, that task was not the responsibility of other nationalist movements. Zionism would have to not only reconquer a symbol, but also make its way through its different readings. First of all it would have to create the land of Israel entirely anew.

Even in its concrete reality, which pioneers affirmed vigorously, this land remains that of a Book, and stays holy. The organisations in charge of acquiring it and those who cultivate it participate in a sacred task. The blue boxes for fund-raising of the National Jewish Funds, the pioneer-settler, both a redeemer and a hero, weave the web of Zionist mythology. The glorification of the ploughman, familiar to the intellectual elite of the Russian Jewish youth from whom came the first pioneers, the influence of Tolstoy's writings and a particular romantic inspiration allied themselves to crystallise a whole movement aiming at social reform and based on an idealisation of the simple life. The coverage which the press and literature of those days gave to agricultural themes and the figures of Jewish ploughmen ploughing the soil of Palestine vividly show this nostalgia of the land and this desire of a normalisation of the Jewish existence. In effect agriculture

was a major activity to absorb crowds of Jews migrating to the country. And the conquest of the land of the ancestors (*erets*), too, had to be based on the creation of a mythology of the cultivated land (*adamah*). It was as if only this work of remythologisation, and hence of abstraction, could paradoxically make palpable to the Jews a land too long caught inside dreams of exile. So nationalists and Zionists always resorted to founding myths which could establish their ideology, the only ones apparently able to give them a real access to the land – the simple purchase of cultivable areas was not enough to guarantee the national ownership of the territory. Pioneers arrived in Palestine with a narrative for luggage, the Biblical narrative. Deep in themselves they wanted to go from symbol to reality by being in touch with the land, and to create a new place where there would be an opportunity. So this explains why they lived far from the spiritual centre of Jerusalem and the distrusted towns, and how an irresistible attraction pushed them towards new lands: wild desert areas. A true (re)birth could not occur anywhere else, but in a place free from the idea, unspoiled by the founding narrative. At the same time, however, this narrative kept the settlement process going, irrigated it, guided it, rooted it in a land which until then was exclusively known through it.

In the literature of the Jewish Enlightenment, the land of Israel is a desired land, but dreamed of, remote and unknown. Eastern European realities are reflected in the look taken at it. Conversely, once they have treaded its soil, immigrants from Eastern Europe begin to yearn for the country that they had left, as if the land of Israel could never become theirs. Even when it is theirs, it carries exile with it. An exile in Israel, still harder than an exile among the nations... However, is not precisely the land of Israel expected to put an end to exile? At the very moment a Jew arrives in Israel, he obviously carries his exile in his luggage. It was an immense dream to think that a Hebrew nation could be built, regardless of this ‘strangeness’ of the land, a ‘strangeness’ which was to haunt, later, the natives themselves. Because exile is passed down from generation to generation. So were the Jews really able to get rid of it and become a people settled on its land at last? Anyway something is sure: the idea of the land has never ceased to dominate the reality of the land.

It is enough to be persuaded of it, to remember the emotion that the Israeli population as a whole, far beyond ultra-orthodox and extremist milieus, felt after the conquest of “territories,” and so of the heart of Ancient Israel, during the Six Days War. A different land, separated from the everyday life of the Israeli, a land loaded with the imagination of centuries, the ancestors’ ritual, the weight of the Book, these territories have become the stake of passionate debates and of a controversial settlement. That is not an ordinary “territory”. It is a Book-land, pregnant with a metahistoric sacrality, off time, beyond reality. All hopes and hatreds, the messianic ones included, converge on this ‘no-land’ of desire, more symbolic than real. There is a sort of return to early days. The mythical land is there to quench the thirst for a Promised Land, a land the borders of which are always

farther. As soon as the land materialises, then the dream is being reborn of a symbolic land that one applies to make real again. It looks as if one were always afraid to be short of the promised land...

The fact that these days 'new' Israeli historians set about the deconstruction of myths around the Zionist Israel, is a proof among others that pluralism has started to shake the old Zionist rhetoric which in its ideological zeal, not typically proper to it, however, prevented mixed speeches for so long. By getting rid of all that comes between the land and them, post-Zionists and those who declare themselves to be, in effect want to have an access to a symbol-free land, and so negotiable with Palestinians. Without entering into the intricacies of this national debate, and by keeping in mind that only a small fringe of Israel society identifies itself with post-Zionism, one is obliged to see that such a discourse expresses a vague desire to come back to the beginning, to a pre-Zionist situation in the days when the land of Israel was just a promised land. Some post-Zionists restored the image of life in exile as a metaphor of moral sensibility and of an open relationship with the Other, which necessarily strengthens this impression. And if you remember the fundamentally ethical standards of post-Zionists you may wonder whether they do not only feel like rejecting a land 'tarnished' by the tribulations of the two peoples throughout the last two centuries and longing for a land at last 'purified,' above contingencies, on the border of the sacred. Totally opposite to this attitude, but strangely echoing it, the messianic irredentism of extremist milieus, it too, wants to have a 'purified' land, but 'rid' of the Other, the Arab, a Book-land, beyond the State, the recovered land of Ancient Israel. If post-Zionists' sacrality is secular, that of Gouch Emounim is religious. The former projects itself into an anteriority near the Promised Land, whereas, paradoxically, the latter, taking on the Zionist ethos, comes close to the phase of conquest, settlement on the land, those times when progressing Zionism wanted to take possession of the land, and turn the Land of Promise into a reality.

The weight of symbols is something. That of the past something else. And it too, prevents Israel from becoming an ordinary land. You get there along with your own land, the land that you have left, the land where your ancestors are buried. Every immigrant carries his exile on him. The less successful his integration in the country, the more his nostalgia for the lost home resurfaces. Some come along with their native land, others with the Torah. In any case, one never comes alone. No ideological discourse, that of Zionists included, has ever been able to wipe out this multiple heritage. Even though it was somewhat smothered by the unifying rhetoric, fashionable until recently, the plurality was present well before it was clamoured for. The Diaspora, the Diasporic experience are to help Jews from the Maghreb to become Israelis, without their having to give up the specificity of their ethnic group. Indeed, despite the famous ideal of the melting pot, the article *par excellence* of the Zionist creed, one goes on living off the soil of two motherlands. One can also strengthen one's 'Israeliness' out of

the geopolitical frontiers of today's Israel: Moroccans who on their way back to their native country for a limited stay, find the roots of their Israeli identity there, or Israeli youths taken on a tour towards the main sites of Shoah in Poland. Local sites in Israel are no more needed even to construct one's identity, as this one goes back to its roots abroad, where the history of Jews took place, with its best or worst chapters. The history of Jews is no longer apart from the history of Israelis. In fact, the division was always artificial, owing to ideological reasons, because one believed that all was to happen on the ground of Israel, even though one should forget what life was like before, to forget what is unforgettable. Today Israel's borders are shifting more than ever before, and Palestinians make themselves heard better; today another people, it too, is deeply conscious of its rights to this land, and so the perspectives are widening and the obsessional attachment to the soil is yielding to other ways of getting rooted – or to the temptation to wander.

Since the 1980's the wandering Israeli is a major figure in the new Israeli literature. Israel is one of the few countries to be very harsh on citizens emigrating to other countries. It is significant that the word *yerida*, literally 'going down' means voluntary departure. The *yerida*, in some way, is a negation of the very foundations of Zionism the aim of which was to turn the land of Israel into the land *par excellence* for all Jews. Obviously this goal has not been reached since the majority of the Jewish people still lives in Diaspora. But at least, couldn't the presence of Israelis themselves be expected to be permanently established? The characters of those novels are sabras, sabras held as part of the elite: Ashkenazi whose parents, pioneers on their arrival in Palestine, are politicians or educators. They were given the best Israeli education, volunteered for fighting units, excelled in their studies. They seem to fit deeply into Israeli life. Their determination to leave the country, to try to start a new life elsewhere, shows, still more clearly, how serious the personal and ideological crisis they are going through is. The land of Israel is too real, it is stifling, and it destroys its inhabitants. Israeli contemporary fiction conveys the increasing malaise of a generation nurtured on the romantic vision of sabras and their future on the land of pioneers, and who have to accept the gap which lies between this vision and Israel's socio-political reality. It reflects a global social and ideological crisis: the generation gap, a disillusion after myths, a feeling of oppressing confinement, combined with a continual state of siege, and increased by the high standards of conformity of a rigid society. Would today's Israelis, not less than yesterday's Jews, always need a place 'over there' to help them to escape a place 'here below'? As if the promised land they are still in quest of could not be but elsewhere. A fragile border exists between the sabra and the wandering Jew.

On the other hand, some Israeli artists deal with some national images and symbols in a highly significant way. For example, Tamar Geller uses the reproduction of "The Ideal City" of Piero della Francesca for her paintings of Tel-Hai, a central site of national mythology. This tension between 'here'

and 'over there' is the preoccupation of these artists. The images of 'over there', reflection of local ideas, are taken from tourist brochures or classics of Art History. In winter 1991, an exhibition of the Israel Museum was organised around works evoking the lack of roots and the wandering, with no anchorage point in a definite territory or a definite form. The myth of the coming out of Egypt, here, is not seen as the beginning of a journey to the Promised Land – but rather as a text of the generation of the desert. In accordance with that choice and the thought of Buber, the language and the syntax of these works put the accent on the idea of expulsion implied in the order to go given to Abraham ("Get out of the country..."⁴) more than on the promise of a land ("Unto thy seed will I give this land"⁵).

Isn't the desert, as Jabès suggests, the physical and mental space for any nomad? Many Israeli artists turn themselves toward the desert, borrow some features of nomadic culture, still preserved by settled Bedouins. They make an effort to go there, to get to Bedouins' camps, then along the way to Palestinian refugee camps. Others rediscover the desert in what the Jewish tradition and the texts which have safeguarded its mythical memory say about it, such as the ritual telling of the coming out of Egypt read at Passover. Luggage, maps, bags: all the elements of the travel – as a quest for identity – fill the works of those artists of nomadism.

In one of his late interviews,⁶ Jabès said that even in Israel, the Jew is a nomad, that his wandering is part of his thought. He also said that whatever the place in the world and the dispersion where they find themselves these days, the Jews are always in exile from the country they left. What are the Israelis dreaming about? One is dreaming of Morocco, the other of Poland. There is something that finally is the world. The Jew is the world. The land of the Jews is also the land of their exile. The Israelis are no different from the other Jews. Deep in themselves they do not only carry the exile of their parents, unrecognised where they used to live, but their own exile as well, an existential exile which keeps pushing them forwards to 'promised land,' a Book-land. If the land escapes the Israelis, they too escape the land. As if this land were promised to impossibility. An impossible land because the real place for a Jew, as Jabès said, is perhaps the Book. In it he finds himself again, he questions himself, the Book is his freedom.

If Israel is a problem, however, it is not only because its inhabitants keep on revisiting their land, taking ever-changing looks at it. For the Diaspora, too, projects its own expectations and frustrations, its hopes and disappointments, symbols and dreams on to this country. It is invested with such a sacrality that it becomes impossible even to begin talking about it. Israeli governments go by and follow one another, and there are always Jews in

4 Gen. 12 :1.

5 Gen. 12 :7.

6 In Sarit Shapira, *Routes of Wandering: Nomadism, Journeys and Transitions in Contemporary Israeli Art* (exhibition catalogue, Jerusalem: Museum of Israel, 1991, in English and Hebrew), pp. 246–56.

Diaspora to approve all of them, without batting an eye, even when passions explode in Israel. That country is an integral part of the identity of a large number of Jewry in exile, in particular French, especially since the Six Days War. That Zionism is existential, not at all monolithic, it is a personal quest rather than an ideology. In some way it is a Zionism typical of the post-industrial society embodied by the Jews of France. It is depoliticised, deideologised and brings back the individual to the centre of its vision. In this identity reconstruction the emotive power of Israel can be imagined. This does not in the least mean that the identification necessarily results in a desire to emigrate. It is enough, to be convinced of it, to remember the small number of the departures. A trip to Israel is the modern form of a pilgrimage in former days. It structures the identity, but like any pilgrimage, it concerns the pilgrim himself more than the reality of the country visited and this modern pilgrim will just remember the aspects coming to his own expectations. Fortunately, here and there, particularly recently, conflicting voices can be heard, and the policies of the government in office are being contested. Despite that, Israel has still kept being something the Jews in Diaspora are proud of, in particular since 1967. It remains a land with many positive attributes and a country of refuge, facing the memory of the dark years of War.

These days, Western Jews plead in favour of integration in Diaspora, while remaining proudly faithful to the home over there, a home where few Americans, French or English would enjoy living. Dispersed all over the world, culturally and religiously divided, the Jewish people nevertheless remains united in its support for a nation-State where Hebrew is spoken and an increasing number of Jews lives. After the Holocaust, a lot of sentimentalism added to the attachment for Israel, the prominent figure of the heroic figure of the soldier or kibbutznik relegating the painful memory of the victims of genocide into the background. The Six Days War reinforced this glorious image which non-Jewish public opinion also approved of. The Jewish imaginary in Diaspora apprehended Israel and the Israelis in a romantic way, which the latter did nothing to demystify. Even now the Diaspora does not look at Israel as it really is. And this also prevents a true encounter with this land and its inhabitants, and prevents, in part, Israel from becoming what it really wants to be; always clinging to expectations that cannot be met. Israel, as its citizens feel it each day, remains, for the most part, unknown to the Jews of Diaspora, who prefer to see and find in it what they want to see and find in it. Israeli post-Zionism is not particularly concerned about the myths about Israel nourished by the contemporary Diaspora – its first aim being to destroy those of Zionism. A part of the American Jewish population is entering, very gradually, a phase which some call post-Zionist and which perhaps does not mean the end of the passionate relationship with Israel. Nevertheless it promises the beginning of a more genuine relationship between the State and the Diaspora. However, the question is whether this land imagined and re-imagined for centuries will ever be able to get rid of the dust of images which became integral

parts of its essence. Maybe it is condemned to exist through alternate crossed images, incorporated in its most immediate reality. Israeli Israel, so many-sided, is not the Israel seen from Diaspora, itself so multifaceted. And not forgetting Israel-in-the-media, and so many others... A unique land, the land of Israel always escapes any oneness, and its myths go on growing in the fields ploughed by the pioneers.⁷

⁷ For further reflection on these themes, taking into account the most recent developments of the situation in Palestine/Israel, see *Israel, the Impossible Land*, 'Afterword', pp. 237-40.