

# REVISITING THE JEWISH QUESTION

ÉLISABETH ROUDINESCO



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Jewish Question  
Élisabeth Roudinesco

Translated by Andrew Brown

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Things have been said about the Jews that are infinitely exaggerated and often contradictory to history. How can the persecutions they have suffered at the hands of different peoples be held against them? These on the contrary are national crimes that we ought to expiate by granting the Jews imprescriptible human rights which no human power could ever take from them. Faults are still imputed to them, prejudices, a sectarian spirit and selfish interests. [...] But to what can we really impute these faults but our own injustices? After having excluded them from every honour, even from the rights to public esteem, we have left them with nothing but lucrative speculations. Let us deliver them to happiness, to the homeland, to virtue, by granting them the dignity of men and citizens; let us hope that it can never be a policy, whatever people say, to condemn to degradation and oppression a multitude of men who live among us.

Maximilien de Robespierre, 23 December 1789

That Céline was a writer given to delirium is not what makes me dislike him. Rather it is the fact that this delirium expressed itself as anti-Semitism; the delirium here can excuse nothing. All anti-Semitism is finally a delirium, and anti-Semitism, be it delirious, remains *the capital error*.

Maurice Blanchot, 1966



# Introduction

‘Nazis, that's what you are! You drive the Jews out of their homes – you're worse than the Arabs.’<sup>1</sup>

This accusation was uttered in December 2008 by some young fundamentalist Jews settled in Hebron, in the West Bank, who had never experienced genocide: it was aimed at other Jews, soldiers of the Israeli Army (Tzahal) who had been given orders to evacuate their compatriots, and who had also never experienced genocide.

‘Nazis worse than Arabs’: these words symbolize the passion that has been spreading unstoppably across the planet ever since the Israeli-Palestinian conflict became the main issue in every intellectual and political debate on the international scene.

At the heart of these debates – and against a background of killings, massacres, and insults – we find extremist Jews reviling other Jews by calling them ‘worse than Arabs’. This shows how much they hate the Arabs, and not just the Palestinians, but *all Arabs* – in other words, the Arab-Islamic world as a whole, and even those who are not Arabs but who claim a stake in Islam in all its varieties:<sup>2</sup> Jordanians, Syrians, Pakistanis, Egyptians, Iranians, inhabitants of the Maghreb, etc. So they are racist Jews: in these words, they are comparing what they call Arabs – i.e., both Muslims and Islamists – with Nazis, *except that the Arabs are not so bad*. But the same Jews identify other Jews with people *worse than Arabs*, i.e., with the worst assassins in history, those genocidal killers responsible for what, in Hebrew, they call the Shoah, the catastrophe – the extermination of the Jews of Europe – that was such a decisive factor in the foundation of the State of Israel.<sup>3</sup>

If you cross the walls, the barbed wire, the borders, you will inevitably encounter the same passion, kindled by extremists who, though they may not represent public opinion as a whole, are just as influential. From Lebanon to Iran, and from Algeria to Egypt, the Jews are often, in one place or another, called Nazis, or seen as the exterminators of the Palestinian people. And the more Jews as a whole are here viewed as perpetrators of post-colonial genocide, as followers of American imperialism, or as Islamophobes,<sup>4</sup> the more people find inspiration in a literature that has sprung from the tradition of European anti-Semitism: 'The Jews', they say, 'are the descendants of monkeys and pigs.' And: 'America has been corrupted by the Jews; the brains of America have been mutilated by those of the Jews. Homosexuality has been spread by the Jew Jean-Paul Sartre. The calamities that befall the world, the bestial tendencies, the lust and the abominable intercourse with animals come from the Jew Freud, just as the propagation of atheism comes from the Jew Marx.'<sup>5</sup>

In that world, people eagerly read *Mein Kampf*, *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, or *The Mythical Foundations of Israeli Policy*;<sup>6</sup> they deny the existence of the gas chambers and denounce alleged Jewish plans to take over the world. It's all thrown into the brew: the Jacobins, the supporters of liberal capitalism, communists, freemasons – all are presented as agents of the Jews, witness for example the Twenty-Second Article of the Charter of Hamas, which marks a real step backwards compared with that of the PLO:<sup>7</sup>

The enemies [the Jews] have been scheming for a long time, and they have consolidated their schemes, in order to achieve what they have achieved. [...] [Their] wealth [permitted them to] take over control of the world media such as news agencies, the press, publication houses,

broadcasting and the like. [...] They stood behind the French and the Communist Revolutions and behind most of the revolutions we hear about here and there. They also used the money to establish clandestine organizations which are spreading around the world, in order to destroy societies and carry out Zionist interests. Such organizations are: the Freemasons, Rotary Clubs, Lions Clubs, B'nai B'rith and the like. [...] They also used the money to take over control of the Imperialist states and made them colonize many countries in order to exploit the wealth of those countries and spread their corruption therein.<sup>[8](#)</sup>

If we turn now to the heart of Europe, especially to France, we see that the same insults erupt with equal vehemence. Many essayists, writers, philosophers, sociologists, and journalists support the Israeli cause while heaping insults on the defenders of the Palestinian cause, while the latter insult them back – and both sides endlessly call each other ‘Nazis’, ‘Holocaust deniers’, ‘anti-Semites’, and ‘racists’. On the one side are the sworn opponents of the ‘Shoah business’ or ‘Holocaust industry’, the ‘genocidal Zionist state’, ‘national-secularism’, ‘collaborators’ ‘Judaecolaters’ and ‘Ziojews’ (Zionist Jews). On the other, we have the fierce critics of ‘collabo-leftist-Islamo-fascist-Nazis’.<sup>[9](#)</sup>

In short, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict – experienced as a structural split tearing the Jews and the Arab-Islamic world apart, but also as a rift within the Jewishness of the Jews or as a break between the Western world and the world of its former colonies – now lies at the centre of all debates between intellectuals, whether they are aware of it or not.

And it is easy to understand why. Ever since the extermination of the Jews by the Nazis – a tragic event underlying a new organization of the world from which sprang the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the State of Israel in Palestine – the notions of genocide and crime against humanity have become applicable to every

country in the world. As a consequence, and gradually, the so-called Western discourse of universalism has been seriously undermined. Since the most civilized nations in Europe had given birth to the greatest of barbarities – to Auschwitz – it was now possible for all the peoples humiliated by colonialism or the various forms of capitalist exploitation, as well as for all minorities oppressed on grounds of their sex, the colour of their skin, or their identity, to criticize so-called universal values of freedom and equality. After all, in the name of these values, Western states had committed the worst crimes and continued to rule the world while perpetrating crimes and misdemeanours that went completely against the principles of the Declaration of Rights that they themselves had enacted.

What we are thus witnessing is a new quarrel over universals. Whether we take an interest in anti-globalization, in the history of colonialism and post-colonialism, of so-called ethnic minorities and minorities of ‘identity’; whether we focus on the construction or deconstruction of definitions of gender or sex (homosexuality, heterosexuality); whether we highlight the need to study the phenomenon of religion or the desacralization of the world; or whether we take the side of history as memory or ‘memorial history’ [*l’histoire mémorielle*] versus scholarly history [*l’histoire savante*], we always start with reference to the question of the extermination of the Jews, insofar as it is a foundational moment in all possible thinking about conflicts over identity. Hence the exacerbation of anti-Semitism and racism we are witnessing, accompanied by a new type of thinking about being Jewish.

As a result of the secular structures of its institutions, France for a long time seemed to be exempt from this type of conflict, to such an extent that Ashkenazi Jews living in Germany, Russia, or Eastern Europe used to dream of it:

happy as God in France, they said. If God did actually live there, he would not be disturbed by prayers, rituals, blessings, and requests to interpret delicate questions of diet. Surrounded by unbelievers, God too would be able to relax when evening fell, just like thousands of Parisians in their favourite cafés. There are few things more agreeable, more civilized, than a tranquil café table outside at dusk.

But times have changed: the French model of secularism has been questioned, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has become a major issue in civil society, and – with the appearance of claims relating to identity and religion – the French Republic has encountered new difficulties in assimilating immigrants from its former colonies. It even seems to have fallen prey, recently, to the mania for evaluating things by their origins – a mania which, in spite of politics, encourages human beings to be categorized in accordance with so-called ethnic and sexual criteria, or on the basis of the ‘community’ to which they ‘belong’. This mania for gauging people is, in the last analysis, perhaps just a return of the repressed, since the country in which human rights were born, and the first country to have emancipated the Jews (in 1791), was also the origin, around 1850, of the first anti-Semitic theories and, in 1940, betrayed its own ideal with the establishment of the Vichy regime.

Revisiting the Jewish question, then, means reviewing the different ways of being Jewish in the modern world ever since, at the end of the nineteenth century, anti-Semitism triggered a revolution in Jewish consciousness. But this will be a historical, critical, dispassionate review, in the spirit of the Enlightenment. It will aim at giving a final answer to this question: who is anti-Semitic and who is not? How can we contribute serenely to freeing the intellectual debate from the follies, hatreds, and insults that are voiced around these questions?

In the first chapter, 'Our First Parents', a clear distinction is drawn between mediaeval (persecuting) anti-Judaism and the anti-Judaism of the Enlightenment (emancipatory and hostile to religious obscurantism): some people today would seek to identify the second form with the first in order to discredit it more definitively – they are all anti-Semitic, it is claimed, from Voltaire to Hitler. In the second chapter, 'The Shadow of the Camps and the Smoke of the Ovens', I examine the stages in the formation of European anti-Semitism, which took a political form in France (from Ernest Renan to Édouard Drumont) and a racial form in Germany with Ernst Haeckel. 'Promised Land, Conquered Land' then takes the reader to Vienna where the Zionist idea was born, conceived by its founders (Theodor Herzl and Max Nordau) as a self-decolonization, by the Arab world as a colonialist plan, and by the Jews of the diaspora as a new factor of division: one idea, three reactions, each of them as legitimate as the others.

In 'Universal Jew, Territorial Jew', this conflict over legitimacy is embodied in a celebrated debate between Sigmund Freud and Carl Gustav Jung. 'Genocide between Memory and Negation' examines the conditions in which 1948 saw the establishment of a State *of* Jews (Israel) in Palestine. The foundation of Israel responded to the need both to set up a Jewish memory of the Shoah and to judge Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem. Over his trial, two great figures of modern Jewishness [*judéité*] (Hannah Arendt and Gershom Scholem) clashed, while in Europe the idea started to spread, beneath the surface, that the genocide was an invention of the Jews. En route, I analyse the positions adopted by various intellectuals on the question of life after Auschwitz, from Jean-Paul Sartre to Maurice Blanchot, via Theodor Adorno, Pierre Vidal-Naquet, and Jacques Lacan: what should be said, done, and thought, how can Jewish identity be redefined?

‘A great and destructive madness’: this is how I present Holocaust denial, a ‘logical’ discourse constructed as the utterance of an insane truth that falsifies the (real) truth and to which Noam Chomsky, the linguist of meaningless structures, gave his weighty authority. The last chapter, ‘Inquisitorial Figures’, focuses on the trials for anti-Semitism brought by certain revisionists of history with the sole aim of muddying the waters and reducing the debate on the Jewish question to a conflict over legitimacy, mapped onto an axis of good and evil.

## Notes

[1](#) Stéphane Amar, ‘Cette maison est à nous, ce pays appartient au peuple d'Israël’, *Libération*, 6 December 2008.

[2](#) Islam is the third monotheistic religion, founded in the seventh century by Muhammad. It derives from Judaism and acknowledges the authority of its prophets, of Abraham and Moses, so it is labelled an Abrahamic religion. Judaism is a religion of Halakha, Islam a religion of sharia: in both cases, the law handed down by God regulates the believer's life: law, worship, ethics, and social behaviour. The word ‘Muslim’ designates those who profess Islam. The word ‘Islamic’ refers to Islam as a religion. Islamism is a political doctrine that sprang up in the twentieth century, and so-called radical Islamism is a more intense form of Islamism that aims to establish, in the name of God's law, a theologico-political regime to take over from pre-existing secular states. But Islam, like other religions, also refers to a whole culture. ‘Fundamentalism’, in Christianity, designates the strict adherence to a doctrine. (In French there are two terms, ‘*intégrisme*’ and ‘*fondamentalisme*’, the former referring to Protestantism, the latter to Catholicism, but they have both been extended to Judaism and to Islam.)

3 In French, the word '*Juif*' is written with a capital letter to designate Jews in the sense of '*Judéité*' (who together comprise a people) while '*juif*' in lower case designates Jews in the sense of '*Judaïté*' (those who practise the Jewish religion, or Judaism, similar to Christians or Muslims).

4 The neologism 'Islamophobia' designates a defamation of Islam and is seen as a form of racism, while the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, in which no breach of God's rights is admissible in law, regards this type of remark as a case of blasphemy. Islamophobia, Judaeophobia, Christianophobia, and their opposites, Judaeophilia, Islamophilia, Christianophilia, and philosemitism are ambiguous neologisms – to be used with caution.

5 Cf. 'Les racines de l'antisémitisme arabe', press cuttings, *Courrier international*, February–March–April 2009, special number, pp. 12 and 13. And remarks made in 2009 against Zionism and its 'accomplices' by the Egyptian *ulema* Alla Said and then broadcast on the Al-Rahma television channel, 2 January 2009.

6 The *Protocols* are a document fabricated in 1903 by an agent of the Russian secret police, Matvei Golovinski (1865–1920), and designed to prove the existence of an alleged plot fomented by a group of Jewish sages bent on exterminating Christianity. See Roger Garaudy, *The mythical foundations of Israeli policy* (London: Studies Forum International, 1997): this is available online at: <https://ia700308.us.archive.org/19/items/TheFoundingMythsOfIsraeliPolitics/RGfounding.pdf> (accessed 8 January 2013). (There is only one French edition of *Mein Kampf*, published in 1934.)

7 PLO: Palestine Liberation Organization, whose (secular) charter, enacted in 1964, was declared 'null and void' in 1989 by Yasser Arafat, who in 1959 had founded Fatah, the main organization for national resistance to the State of Israel. In this declaration, Arafat recognized the existence of



this state. Hamas: Islamic resistance movement, an offshoot of the Palestinian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood (who deny the right of the State of Israel to exist).

8 The founding text of the Charter of Hamas: it can be found online at, e.g.,

[www.thejerusalemfund.org/www.thejerusalemfund.org/carryover/documents/charter.html](http://www.thejerusalemfund.org/www.thejerusalemfund.org/carryover/documents/charter.html) (accessed 16 September 2012). See also Charles Enderlin, *Le grand aveuglement: Israël et l'irrésistible ascension de l'islam radical* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2009).

9 Torrents of insults of this kind, with the inventing of neologisms playing a key part, are poured forth on the Internet the whole time.

# 1

## Our First Parents

As Hannah Arendt eloquently points out, we must avoid confusing anti-Semitism, the racist ideology that spread from the end of the nineteenth century onwards, with anti-Judaism, which developed in the West once Christianity had become the state religion under Emperor Theodosius at the end of the fourth century. It was in this period – in other words, over forty years after the Council of Nicaea (summoned in 325 by Emperor Constantine) – that Christianity finally transformed itself into an official religion imposed by the secular power: Jesus had announced the Kingdom, and what arrived was the Church. The pagans, who had previously been the persecutors of the first Christians, were now persecuted in their turn, just as survivals of Graeco-Latin culture were eradicated: the Olympic Games were banned, and homosexuals were put to death – at that time they were labelled ‘sodomites’ and were already regarded as perverts because they represented an attack on the laws of procreation.

The Christian anti-Judaism which then spread throughout Europe – until the age of the Enlightenment – rested on the same principles, with one difference: for Christian monarchs, Judaism was far from being a form of paganism. So the Jew was neither the enemy from outside, nor the barbarian from beyond the frontiers, nor the infidel (the Muslim), nor the heretic (the Albigensian, the Cathar), nor the *other*, foreign to himself. He was the enemy within, placed at the heart of a genealogy – the first parent, according to the Christian

tradition – since he gave birth to Christianity: the founder of the new religion was Jewish.

The Jew as bearer of Judaism was thus all the more hateful as he was simultaneously *inside* and *outside*. He was inside because he existed within the Christian world, but outside because he did not recognize the true faith and lived in a different community from that of the Christians. If Christianity was to become the only universal monotheistic religion – and Christ to cease being a bearer of the Jewish name – it still needed to be rid of its Jewish origin, which was now deemed insidious. The sexual theme of the treacherous, perverse Jew, with unnatural morals (it was claimed that Jewish women slept with goats), was ubiquitous in the anti-Jewish persecutions of the mediaeval period, and this is why the figure of the Jew was often associated with that of the sodomite and the committer of incest.

Evidence for this can be found in the astonishing legend of the Jewish curse, repeated by Jacobus de Voragine around 1260, which turned Judas into an equivalent of Oedipus, destroying the *genos* (dynasty) of the Labdacids and thus the family order too, and combining incest with parricide. Here is the story in outline: Ciborea, pregnant with Reuben, dreamt that she would give birth to an accursed child, sullied by vice, who would bring about the ruin of the Jewish people. After the birth of this son, called Judas, she got rid of him, putting him into a basket on the open seas. But the frail vessel was shipwrecked on an island whose queen was barren: she adopted the child. When he grew up and learned that he was not the son of his parents, Judas fled to Jerusalem and entered the service of Pilate. One day, the latter came to taste the apples in a neighbouring garden: Judas hurried across and quarrelled with the owner, unaware that it was Reuben. He killed him, and Pilate bequeathed on him Reuben's wife and his belongings. When he discovered

that he had killed his father and married his mother, Judas went over to Jesus and became his disciple. But he later betrayed him and hanged himself.<sup>1</sup>

In short, throughout the long history of the mediaeval world, the Jew was simultaneously devil and sorcerer, his father's murderer and his mother's husband; but he was also both sexes in one. Furthermore, he was often described as an animal, embodying a highly particular duality of male and female: he was a union of male scorpion and female sow. In the order of humankind, he abolished the difference of the sexes and the generations, being incestuous and double-sexed (masculine/feminine), and, in the order of animal existence, he disregarded the barrier between different species, indulging in unnatural copulation. A master of poisons, of usury and knowledge, lustful and gluttonous, he was thus the incarnation of absolute horror.

The Jews were denounced as deicides until the Council of Trent:<sup>2</sup> in Europe they formed a 'community' that was assigned to no particular territory: a community at once visible and invisible, a wandering community. Confined to practising trades from which Christians were debarred, the Jews were accused of all sorts of repellent activities linked to their status as transgressors of sexual difference and the separation between species: bestiality, ritual murder, incest, child stealing, profanation of the host, consumption of human blood, polluting the waters, exploiting lepers for their own purposes, spreading the plague, laying all sorts of plots. But especially, and for the same reason, they were regarded as holding the three great powers proper to humanity as such: the power of finance, the power of intellect, and a perverse power over sexuality. So it then became necessary, in order to reduce the power attributed to them, to force them either to convert or to accept a continual humiliation: 'Talmud-burning', wearing elbow caps, yellow hats, or

badges of infamy, and confinement within Jewish ghettos – or ‘jewries’ [*juiveries*] – under strict surveillance.<sup>3</sup>

This anti-Judaism – which aimed not to exterminate the Jews but to convert them, to persecute them, or to expel them – was not a form of anti-Semitism in the modern sense, since it occurred at a time in human history when it was God – not human beings – who governed the world.

The Christian anti-Judaism of the mediaeval period actually presupposed the principle of divine sovereignty – of a single God (monotheism) – while anti-Semitism, which saw the Jew as the specimen of a ‘race’, and no longer as a partner in a divine covenant (even one that was decried), rested on a transformation of the religious Jew into a Jew-by-identity, the bearer of a stigma – in other words, a ‘remainder’: Jewishness.

Embodied up to the eighteenth century by divine right monarchs as supported by the Roman Catholic Church,<sup>4</sup> the God of the Christians decided the future of the world, while the God of the Jews, invisible and unrepresentable, continued to promise his people the coming of a Messiah and a return to the Promised Land. For as long as the West remained Christian, Jews and Christians had one and the same God, even though the relationship between the two groups and this one God was not identical.

For while Christianity is a religion of individual and collective faith, represented by a Church – and even more by the Roman Catholic Church – Judaism is a religion of belonging, accompanied by a cult of memory, of a thinking comprised by glosses and commentaries and obedience to ancestral rites affecting clothing, the body (circumcision), food (*kashrut*), and behaviour (Sabbath). It is based on the primacy of an original and endlessly renewed alliance (or testament) between God and his chosen people.

In other words, the Jewish religion is different from the two monotheisms to which it has given birth. Ever since they

have existed, the Jews have designated themselves not simply as Jewish – in other words, as observing a religion called Judaism – but as a mythical people and a nation, springing from the Kingdom of Israel and then Judaea (Zion), with Jerusalem as its holy city. Consequently, according to the Jewish law (Halakha), every Jew remains a member of his people, even when he has ceased to practise his Judaism and even when he rejects his Jewishness by converting. And when a non-Jew converts to Judaism he becomes Jewish for all eternity, whether he wants this or not.

To be Jewish, then, is not like being a Christian since, even when he abandons his religion, a Jew continues to be part of the Jewish people and thus the history of his people: such is his Jewishness, his identity as a godless Jew, as opposed to the Jewishness of those who remain religious. This idea was never taken up by any other religion: according to Jewish law, you remain Jewish (in the sense of Jewishness) even when you have stopped being Jewish (in the sense of Judaism). And you are a Jew once and for all, without any possibility of changing, either by descent through the mother or by conversion.

The German satirist and journalist Ludwig Börne, who converted to Lutheranism in 1818 and then settled in France, the native land of human rights and the emancipation of the Jews, summed up the principle of this always suspect and forever fraught identity: 'Some reproach me with being a Jew, some praise me because of it, some pardon me for it, but all think of it.'<sup>5</sup>

And this people, ever since its mythic origins, has been characterized by the cult of its own memory. It never stops remembering catastrophes (Shoah) that have always been visited upon it by God, each time condemning it to exile and scattering (diaspora or *galut*), and thus the loss of its territory and its holy places: Nebuchadnezzar destroyed the First Temple built by Solomon, the Jews were taken off into

captivity in Babylon, they returned from captivity, they rebuilt the Second Temple that was then destroyed by Titus – and of which only a wall of cries and lamentations (the Wailing Wall) would remain – and they were persecuted by the Romans, who renamed Judaea *Palaestina*,<sup>6</sup> and then by the Christians.

The history of the Jewish people is the history of eternal suffering, of profound misfortune, and of boundless lamentation that finds expression, throughout the expulsions and the massacres, in the dream – which can never be realized without some catastrophe – of a return to the Promised Land: ‘The Everlasting will scatter you among all the peoples from one end of the earth to another. He will make your heart restless, your eyes languishing, your soul suffering.’ Until the rise of Zionism, a result of the desacralization of the European world, the Jewish people would remain the people of memory, of looking back, perpetually awaiting an entry into history.

And when the new religion (Christianity) was proclaimed, a religion to which Judaism had given birth and which in a sense subsumed it, the Jews then had to fix the oral Law (Torah), in Jerusalem and in Babylon, in texts and commentaries (Mishnah and Gemara), so that Judaism would become an orthodox corpus of unified rules (the Talmud). Remember the land that is always promised (Eretz Israel) by Yahweh to the ancient Hebrews, the people of the Bible, wandering and nomadic; remember the land that is always lost and regained; remember the Everlasting and his uniqueness; remember Noah, the father of the ark and the covenant, Abraham, the common ancestor of the three monotheisms,<sup>7</sup> and Moses, the founder of the law; remember what remains of the Jew when the Jewish people is scattered and when the Jew is no longer altogether Jewish. ‘Next year in Jerusalem’: such is the complex fate of the Jews.

In this regard, Jewish mysticism has always borne a certain messianism of return and withdrawal, since the redemption promised by God can come about only in two ways: either by a spiritual regeneration leading to internal exile or by a concrete and collective break that finds expression in departing for the Holy Land, a land that can be granted by God only through the voice of a new Messiah.

This indeed was the choice made by Sabbatai Zevi, who, under the Ottoman Empire in the middle of the seventeenth century, proclaimed himself to be the Messiah. After inflicting severe mortifications on himself, and having swung several times from a state of melancholia to a state of exultation, he defied Jewish law and was subjected to a *herem*.<sup>8</sup> With the help of his disciple Nathan of Gaza, abandoning the attempt to imbue himself spiritually with God's intimate presence, he so roused the Jewish communities of the East that he convinced them to work towards the rebirth of the ancient Kingdom of Israel. He was imprisoned, and agreed to convert to Islam before being exiled to Dulcigno in 1676, abandoned by the faithful.<sup>9</sup>

At the end of a magnificent study of the main currents in Jewish mysticism, Gershom Scholem describes how, in its final phase, Hasidism, which had followed Sabbateanism, eventually transformed its theoretical search, and indeed its mystical quest, into an inexhaustible source of narratives: everything has become history, he says – in other words, history as memory. And he relates this anecdote, borrowed from a Hebrew storyteller (Maggid):

When the Baal Shem had a difficult task before him, he would go to a certain place in the woods, light a fire and meditate in prayer – and what he had set out to perform was done. When a generation later the ‘Maggid’ of Meseritz was faced with the same task he would go to the same place in the woods and say: We can no longer light the fire, but we can still speak the prayers – and what he wanted



done became reality. Again a generation later Moshe Leib of Sassov had to perform this task. And he too went into the woods and said: We can no longer light a fire, nor do we know the secret meditations belonging to the prayer, but we do know the place in the woods to which it all belongs – and that must be sufficient; and sufficient it was. But when another generation had passed, and Rabbi Israel of Rishin was called upon to perform the task, he sat down on his golden chair in his castle and said: We cannot light the fire, we cannot speak the prayers, we do not know the place, but we can tell the story of how it was done. And, the storyteller adds, the story which he told had the same effect as the actions of the other three.[10](#)

Even beyond the world of Hasidism, this anecdote bears witness to the sense of belonging and identity experienced by the Jews and defined as a ‘remainder’ and as a ‘remember!’, making the return to the Holy Land at once possible and impossible.

Jacques Le Goff relates how Louis IX, in the middle of the thirteenth century, behaved towards the enemies of the faith: heretics, infidels, and Jews. He regarded the first group as the worst since they had practised the faith and then denied it, thereby becoming traitors, felons, and apostates, ‘infected by the stain of perversity’. He advised burning them or expelling them from his kingdom. He viewed the second group as enemies ‘full of filth’, but they did have a soul as they belonged to a religion. As for the Jews, ‘hateful and filled with venom’, he proposed that they be enslaved forever, turned into pariahs and outsiders ‘subjected to the yoke of slavery’.

However, from this point of view, the Jewish religion was regarded neither as a heresy (Albigensian or Cathar) nor as the religion of the external enemy (the Saracens). It was recognized and familiar since it had given rise to the Christian religion. So the Jews needed to be protected as

well as controlled. And if only they accepted conversion, they would be reincorporated within Christianity. 'How are we to describe Saint Louis's attitude towards the Jews?' asks Jacques Le Goff.

We currently have two terms at our disposal: anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism. The first concerns religion exclusively and, whatever the importance of religion in Jewish society and Saint Louis's behaviour towards it, it is inadequate. The set of problems concerned by this behaviour goes beyond the strictly religious context and activates feelings of hatred and a desire to exclude that go beyond hostility to the Jewish religion. But 'anti-Semitism' is inadequate and anachronistic. There is nothing racial about Saint Louis's attitude and ideas. Not before the nineteenth century did pseudo-scientific racial theories foster racist and anti-Semitic mentalities and sensibilities. The only term I can think of to describe Saint Louis's behaviour is 'anti-Jewish'. But this anti-Jewish conception, practice and policy paved the way for later anti-Semitism. Saint Louis is a stage on the path of Christian, western and French anti-Semitism.<sup>[11](#)</sup>

This is an excellent lesson in method. There are actually two ways of discussing the Jewish question. The first consists in accumulating facts and events and smoothing over differences, while the second emphasizes changing paradigms and breaks, and prevents us from projecting our own beliefs onto the past and interpreting utterances in an opportunistic way. The conclusion should never precede the evidence.

In other words, in order to discuss the Jewish question, we should favour neither the fiction of a Jewish historiography that presents an apologetic vision of victims persecuted since the dawn of time by murderous villains who always remain the same, nor the fiction of an anti-Jewish historiography resting on the claim that there is a Jewish plot whose conspirators aim to take over the world. Rather,

we need to show – so as to go beyond them – how these two representations fuel each other, whenever new debates on Jewishness and anti-Semitism arise.

In virtue of this method, in which I will forebear from inventing a genealogy of the plot *against* the Jews (the symmetrical opposite of the mythology of the plot ascribed *to* the Jews), I will be claiming that, while the persecution of the Jews is ancient and proven, it has varied from one period to the next, just as the Jews have not remained self-identical throughout their history.

In this spirit, I will also suggest that we can call the history of the persecution of the Jews a ‘history of anti-Semitism’, though only on condition that the word ‘anti-Semitism’, as defined at the moment of its coining in 1879 and its massive spread as a racial ideology and a political movement, cannot be retrospectively applied to Christian anti-Judaism, and even less – as we shall see – to the anti-Judaism of the Enlightenment period.

In other words, the term ‘anti-Judaism’ comes with several paradigmatic variants that change with the period under study. Thus, Saint Louis's policy went beyond mere mediaeval anti-Judaism and targeted the Jew behind the Jew, without this being made explicit, and without this anti-Jewish policy being a form of anti-Semitism. The anti-Judaism of the Enlightenment, on the other hand, did not rise from any anti-Jewish policy but from a desire, shared by both Jews and non-Jews, to reform the status of Judaism as well as the status of the life of Jews in society.

Conversely, I will be claiming that, these days, the language of anti-Semitism also finds utterance, *to various degrees* and sometimes unconsciously, in almost all discourses of Christian, Islamic, or atheist anti-Judaism. This stems from the fact that anti-Semitism eventually incorporated, in its very definition, the main signifiers of hatred of the Jews. This is why the word can be kept as a

generic term that enables us to designate every form of anti-Jewish discourse.

One episode of the history of Christian anti-Judaism – that of *limpieza de sangre* – shows that, at the end of the fifteenth century, which to some extent marks the end of the Middle Ages, the theme of race was present in Spain in the designation of certain people who were deemed to be repellent: these included converts, whether Jews or Muslims (Marranos and Moriscos respectively), and the descendants of lepers. Encouraged to convert, the Jews of the Iberian peninsula, or Sephardim, were actually suspected of secretly continuing with their former practices while making a show of their new faith. In this way they were, as heretics, subject to punishment by the Inquisition. And, as they were powerful in society, the ‘old Christians’, said to be ‘of pure stock’, labelled them as impure, or as ‘pigs’ (*marranos*).

Hence the appearance of ‘statutes on purity of blood’ that authorized converts, by means of various documents – certificates of baptism, production of proof that one's parents were converts, etc. – to become Christians. Of course, reference to purity of blood, in *ancien régime* societies, was based on lineage and heredity, and not on biological race in the sense of the nineteenth century. But ultimately, the idea that an identity could be based on a definite stigma, even after a spiritual commitment that might have made it possible to escape from distinctive signs (yellow hat or elbow cap), was a clear indication that the status of the convert was itself suspect: a declaration of faith was not enough to turn a Jew – or indeed a Muslim – into a real Christian. Whatever the degree of their sincerity or lack of it, new Christians were definitely, in the eyes of other Christians, nothing but imposters or apostates. Hence the discriminatory laws that would be laid down over two centuries.<sup>[12](#)</sup> These did not prevent the great expulsion of 1492: the Alhambra Decree drove 150,000 Sephardic Jews

into exile – in other countries in Europe, North Africa, and the Ottoman Empire – while 50,000 others became Christians without ever managing to ensure for themselves full and entire membership of the Catholic community.

The Marranos were in a dreadful situation. As converted Jews, they were both new Christians and new Jews. In Spain and Portugal, forced to convert, they secretly practised their faith. But, if they emigrated, they had to convert (back) to Judaism, while other Jews continued to suspect them of still being ex-Christians, culturally speaking. In this respect, Marranism can be defined structurally as a passing or transition between two existences.<sup>13</sup> The Marrano subject was forever a convert, and everywhere an outsider, divided against himself and a prisoner of his past as well as of his future: he was a Jew to the Christians and a Christian to the Jews. This proved a real opportunity either for fomenting rebellious ideas about faith, religion, and dogma or else for turning out real dogma-driven fanatics.

It was in Amsterdam, that unique melting pot of the mid-seventeenth century, that Spinozan deism, later to turn into atheism, gained a foothold. Baruch de Spinoza was born a Jew and never converted: he was the product of the Marrano community which had fled the Iberian peninsula in order to escape the Inquisition. In 1656, though he had not as yet published anything, he argued against the immortality of the soul and the divine status of the scriptures, thereby denying the fundamental principles of the Jewish and Christian faiths. Indeed, he was almost killed by a fanatic. To avoid scandal, the *parnassim*<sup>14</sup> offered him all sorts of compromise positions: 'If Spinoza had so wished', writes Henry Méchoulan, 'he could have retired to some nearby village, with a small pension granted by the community, or he might even have been able to continue the outward practice of a faith he had now lost. But Spinoza refused all compromise. By breaking away from the religion of his

fathers, Spinoza was endeavouring to act on behalf of universality.’<sup>[15](#)</sup>

Because he refused to countenance any pretence, Spinoza was himself enacting a break that would lead him to Spinozism. In other words, he was ratifying his own exclusion (*herem*), marking this as a precondition for the future development of his doctrine. This is why his *herem* implied a deliberate non-return (*shamatta*), on both sides in the dispute. On the judges' side, this *herem* was garnished with violent curses that are found in the formulation of no other *herem* of that period:

After the judgement of the Angels, and with that of the Saints, we excommunicate, expel and curse and damn Baruch d'Espinoza [...] with the consent of this holy congregation [...] in front of the holy scrolls [...]. Cursed be he by day, and cursed be he by night; cursed be he when he lies down, and cursed be he when he rises up [...]. The Lord will not pardon him [...] the Lord will destroy his name from under the heavens [...] We order that nobody should communicate with him orally or in writing, or show him any favor, or stay with him under the same roof, or come within four ells of him, or read anything composed or written by him.<sup>[16](#)</sup>

It thus becomes clear why Spinoza later, in his philosophical works, attacked the Jewish religion so violently, emphasizing the way the universal hatred which the Jews aroused stemmed partly from the way they distinguished themselves from other peoples by their attachment to rites aimed at their own preservation. In so doing, he was criticizing nothing other than the intolerance and hatred which the Jews demonstrated in their ‘execration’ of those who dared to question their dogmas.

And, through this judgement, Spinoza was ultimately denouncing the forms of religious intolerance proper to