



Introduction

By Ricardo Feierstein (Argentina), Conference Director

The Third International Conference of Intellectuals was held in the city of Rosario, Argentina, on the 30th and 31st of July and the 1st August, 2005, on the premises of the *Asociación Israelita de Beneficencia (Kehilah)* [Israelite Beneficence Association] and the Jaim N. Bialik School of the same town, and was graced with the co-participation of the *Asociación Mutual Israelita Argentina (AMIA)* [Argentina Israelite Mutual Association] of Buenos Aires, the Northeastern University (NEU) of Boston, USA, and the *Maestría en Diversidad Cultural de la Universidad Nacional de Tres de Febrero (UNTREF)* [Master's in Cultural Diversity at the Third Of February National University], Argentina.

Representatives from Chile, Uruguay, Mexico, the US, Cuba and Germany participated, as did communities from Argentina's interior: Córdoba, San Juan, Mendoza, Rosario, Bahía Blanca, Entre Ríos, Santa Fe; present were Sephardics and Ashkenazis; the secular and the religious; university academics, writers, painters, musicians, photographers, philosophers, historians and psychoanalysts; in attendance were also representatives of other "ghettos" (feminists, Arabs, Gypsies, Africans) whose experiences fall under the banner of the conference.

Around fifty contributions dealing with the theme of the conference "**Growing Up in the Ghetto, Growing Up in the World**" were read (and discussed) before an enthusiastic and large audience—one thousand people at the inauguration, hundreds of spectators at each of the proposed conference tables. In all, a provocative invitation for the participants to dialectically round out the two prior conferences that took place in 2001 and 2003 at the Buenos Aires AMIA, which both gave birth to volumes published by Editorial Milá. The first of these bore the theme "**Recreating Jewish Culture, 1894-2001,**" the second, "**Recreating Jewish Culture 2: Literature and Plastic Arts.**"

As each of these headings suggest, the first conference entailed creative reflections and propositions on the possibility and emergence of a Jewish culture in the new century. It did so against the backdrop of the terrible attack against AMIA in 1994—which caused some to question the continuity of the community in Argentina—and in the presence of conclusive confirmation of the enormous velocity of change imposed by globalization, with its dilution of nation states and its profound modifications to human creativity. At the second conference the focus was on unfolding, specifically, on the effects and propositions of the new situation of Judaism in the world and, by extension, of minority cultures in larger societies, centered in this case on the development undergone by these two creative disciplines, as well as the conceptualizations that might be elaborated upon based on these experiences.

In this Third Conference the potential of the imagination found an ideal point of departure. The action of any contemporary creative artist in two different and simultaneous dimensions—that of his/her group of origin or reference and that of the “global village” towards which human society is trending and the disciplines that represent it—force us to take up anew that original sense of belonging based on immigration, while at the same time blending it—in the Jewish case—with the emergence of the State of Israel, which, now consolidated after existing for 57 years, strikes a new balance of relationships and influence with the Jewish communities of this planet.

An interesting feature here is the confrontation—for the first time in this type of conference—of two different generations: the mature, with its elaborate thinking, sometimes replete with citations on which it is founded, and the young who elaborate a series of newfangled ideas upon the old themes, which, though debatable, acquire value on account of their self-assuredness. Nor is the situation—and this is the best thing—always generation-specific: Adult voices are heard clamoring for entirely new developments, while youthful representatives are heard repeating, in barely-modified form, the theses taught by their elders.

This counterpoint adds an interesting angle—yet another one!—to the exciting exchange of opinion on the pages that follow.

Fourth Speech

The Centrality of the Fringe

By Diana Sperling

If we remove one hand from the cosmos, does that hand exist, or not?

Thus asked Aristotle in the 4th century of the Common Era. The question seems to be the tardy answer to Socrates’ restless dilemma, when, during the trial to which he was subjected, the old teacher was made to decide whether to take hemlock or go into exile. His choice, as we know, fell on the side of the first alternative. But what we are concerned with here is the argument he supplied for it: The old Greek rejected the possibility of leaving, because, he said, in that way he would not only not save his life—his future life—, but he would also squander his past one.

We should pause for a moment on that consideration: Socrates preferred to die in his *polis*, than to live abroad, since, to him, that would not have been living. Out there, outside the city that raised and educated him, he would not be, he says, Socrates.

That inextricable bond between land and identity, between proper name and place of residence, is the point I wish to place under scrutiny.

The Greeks were and aspired to be **autochthonous**, from the word *autos*, “itself,” “that which is in and of itself,” and *ctonos*, “earth,” “ground,” “land.”

To exist for oneself, to be oneself, is only possible given such a bond with the land, given that iron sense of belonging. Autochthony presupposes that one is an offspring of the land, as a plant or a rock is. Man belongs to the earth, and the earth to man, a natural tie, the rupture of which entails the loss of identity, comparable to the loss of life itself.

In Jewish thought, this is a Pagan concept. The Jew understands his ties to the land in terms that are not natural, but legal. We inhabit the earth that belongs, as the Biblical text says, to the Lord; in other words possession is, in any event, contractual, circumstantial and subject to laws.

We are not offspring of the land, but of the letter

The fact of the matter is that Judaism, far from having been born of or on the land, was born in exile. It is the expulsion from the Great Eden that makes human existence, access to work, sexuality and finiteness possible. It is G-d’s command to Abraham, *lech lechah*, that sets the Patriarch on the road to becoming a father of peoples. But the Jews as a people were founded during the Exodus from Egypt; the transit through the desert was the occasion of receiving the Law. (As opposed to the law that came from Rome to form Occidental law, which was based in two principles: paternity, the figure of the *pater familiae* as he who exercises rule, *auctoritas*; and the territorial property that informs a patrimony.)

Transience, exile, Diaspora, then, is not a mere historico-geographic accident, but a spatial metaphor of a condition inherent in human existence: We are, forever, foreigners. The circumstance—tardy in history—of having a state should not confuse us in this regard: Judaism is diasporic by definition and vocation, and Israel would do well not forget this particular datum of reality.

A double question asked by Pasternak was “What does it mean to be Jewish, what is it for? Blanchot offered a triple answer: “It exists so that the idea of the Exodus and that of exile as a just movement can exist; it exists for the sake of expatriation

and for the sake of the initiative represented by the Exodus, so that the experience of the unfamiliar might grow firm before us in an irreducible relationship; it exists so that we, by the authority of that experience, might learn”¹

Let us proceed piecemeal: The notion of Exodus and exile as a just movement implies, in principle, that justice requires movement, and that movement is to step outside of oneself, to empty oneself outwards, to break the siege of oneself in order to accommodate others. The other, the strange one, the foreigner, the foreigner whose foreign condition, that is, his otherness, can never be reduced to an identity, will never be the object of possession, nor use, nor submission. To “learn to speak,” then, would be to be able to preserve that distance, that strangeness that separates me from others and, at the same, connects me to them in a relationship of responsibility that cannot be delegated.

Because for words to exist, there must be at least two of them, two different ones, capable of speaking and listening, of being silent and calling and being called. But “for two to exist, they must be three:” it is not a matter of a connection such as that between an object and its mirror-image, but of the radical heterogeneity the Law instates, the inalienably singular character of one-and-one (as the Talmud says) in the asymmetry of the encounter. “Ever since there were two,” says Levinas, “everything is in danger.”

In such a relationship, the categories of *autochthonous* and *foreign*, of *local* and *visiting* are thrown in disarray, are reformulated, re-signified. It is no longer a matter of one fixed term and another mobile, one with rights and another with obligations, one proper, and the other improper.

What are thrown into disarray, then, all at once, are places, conventional ways of thinking about space and the situating of things in it, references and belongings, limits and positions, and hence, possessions.

If Judaism was founded in leaving, then what is its inside, and what its outside? If to leave a territory is to enter into a new truth, how are interior and exterior to be considered?²

¹ Blanchot, Maurice: “Lo indestructible” in *El diálogo inconcluso*, Published by Monte Ávila, Caracas, 1970

² Abraham presents himself as a “*ger vetoshav*,” a resident foreigner, when he asks Efron, the lord of the land he is passing through, to sell him a plot of land on which to bury his

Abraham, the first Hebrew, the *ivri*, the man who crossed borders in order to inaugurate a new mode of awareness of the present; the man of the step forward and advance, of exit and change, of beginning and walking, founder and founded in that transit, shifted the sense of belonging by moving “from one world—the world that consisted of Sumer—to an as yet non-world,”³ something yet to be done that will never cease, nor should ever cease, to be done.

Exile does not consist merely of leaving a place but rather in questioning the notion of spatiality itself, in bankrupting the categories with which space has always been considered, land and room: these traditional categories are what have allowed empires to be established, dominions to be expanded, and foreigners subjugated. Perhaps it is the Jew’s intimate connection to exile that undermines the notion of identity, leaving all pretense of consistency, of definition, of concept incomplete, again and again. Thus neither man nor place is made sacred.

Judaism comes into the world to overturn the fixed idea, the sacred, the idolatry of earth and identity, that thing which, on account of a desire to be identical, tolerates difference poorly. Difference, in the latter paradigm, always comes in second as compared to being identical. For Judaism, on the other hand, difference is constitutional, inaugural, founding.

G_d, *HaMakom*, is the only thing that can truly and rightly be called “the place,” but precisely on that account is non-locatable, since it is no place at all but the possibility itself for places to exist—all places. Like the Platonic *jora*, meaning “empty space” (G_d can never be the “content” of anything), the other way of designating Him is *HaShem*, the Name that is no name, name without content. If *Ha-Makom* means literally *he came upon the place*, then Jewishness consists of another place, not a utopia but a **heteropia**.

wife. The word *ger* is a foreign one, but is related by a common root to the verb *lagur* which means, simultaneously, to inhabit or reside and to fear. This is the same amphibology that Benveniste reveals regarding hospitality/hostility (cf. his *Vocabulario de las instituciones indoeuropeas* [“The Vocabulary of Indo-European Institutions”]). In Hebrew there are, at the same time, other terms that demonstrate the same amphibology: the root *nun-caf-reish* (n-c-r) gives us the verb *lehaquir*, to know/recognize, and *nochri*, foreigner, other person. The sinister, then, milling about the familiar.

³ Blanchot, *op. cit.*

Identitary marketing

Attachment to the land and identity go hand in hand. Thus, just as autochthony presupposes a natural and immediate relationship with the land, identity is ignorant of subjective division, ignores the foreigner dwelling within oneself, one's own sense of alienation.

Moreover, in a world governed by the laws of the marketplace, group identity—as a vindication—becomes a target market for certain products and consumer circuits. Thus, there are newspapers, clothes, books, and shows for each of these groups—gays, Afro-descendants, whatever the case may be—that are in the process of claiming their own identitary grouping in the belief that they are “freer,” while in reality what they are doing is inserting themselves all the more within an economy that bulldozes every difference in its way: these are the various identities that constitute, in effect, an in-different difference, since they are entering into a system of economic equivalence and monetary homogenization like a set of clubs that wear different T-shirts or wave a different flag, but are all subject to the same regime of consumerism. In the market environment the imagination (Spinoza found the modern form of superstition to be advertising), the fabrication of illusory consistencies, the “false currency” of values presumed rebellious but fictitiously assertive, all prevail.

Only singularity can escape these postmodern constraints, since it does not constitute a “type,” a profile; it is, rather, an otherness that takes place without ever firmly fixating any identity but instead, through active and creative practices, creates one anew in each moment.

The Diaspora—in a metaphorical sense—is one of these practices.

On steps forward and the borderline

But Abraham is not the only *ivri*. At each step of the way the Biblical text relates the travels, transit and leaving of its protagonists. Patriarchs and prophets come and go in an interminable trajectory that leads across borders and territories, to roam far and return to the land that, one day, will be the one they can inhabit with legitimacy.

Jacob, the last Patriarch, battled with a strange person—but who is stranger than oneself?—in the murky night of his dream and emerged wounded from the fight: It was his leg that, from that moment on, was smitten with a crippled gait, failed, difficult, a gait that was to become that of Israel, a course never strait, never fully achieved but instead always at risk, open to the nights and days that no oracle can predict. Dislocated, the Hebrew marched on without assurances, constructing fragile huts, exposed, and inhabiting a certain helplessness that is more like an active form of waiting. Not only individuals, the Patriarchs but, now, it was the people who were to travel immense distances in order to receive and be received, finally, by the Law.

Dislocation and disturbance: these are just movements. Or, to be precise, they are the precondition for the possibility of a new idea of justice, one that represents Judaism at its deepest core. Thus the Law and exile are, so to speak, twins, two clear yet difficult names for Jewishness.

Such dislocation and disturbance leads us to ask ourselves about the ghetto, its nature, and statute. If the ghetto is a type of confinement, are we being locked up by others? Is it the gentile society that hosts us, and, at the same time, excludes us? Or is it something of our own making, a way of preserving ourselves, of forging a space for coexistence according to our own rules in order to avoid our dissolution in the bosom of “the others?” Is the ghetto a place of protection and self-determination, or a leftover, a byproduct of society as a whole, an abyss into which it throws us, so as to better ignore us? Perhaps all of the above, since, at different moments in history and according to the circumstances, the same term has had various connotations and evaluations.

The ghost of assimilation haunts this piece of writing, as it has haunted and re-haunted the history of the Jews each time the subject is broached. Is to leave the ghetto to lose oneself? Is to remain Jewish to resign oneself to confinement and reject all contact with the gentile world, in order to avoid the risk of being “captured” by it?

Or, to the contrary, is to remain cornered to passively accept exclusion, negation, the pressure of universal condition of not wanting to know anything about singularity? Would that make the ghetto, then, a splinter of otherness, an alien

corpuscle in a state that aspires to homogeneity, uniformity, to being capable of being regulated?

Does the ghetto constitute a different mode of hospitality or asylum? What mutual dangers face one another, looking at each other like enlarging shadows on the wall? Are *they* the ones that are afraid of *us*, or are *we* the threatened ones? To draw a circle around our environment—a *siyag* around the Torah is what the sages asked for—is no alien act to our tradition:⁴ protection and threat play against each other within these limits, but they are precisely in that point almost indistinguishable.

What is happening and what remains

Up until the threshold of modernity, Jewish communities in exile enjoyed a high degree of autonomy: they had their own government, juridical structure and courts, which enabled them to maintain, not only in the sectarian aspects, but, in all aspects of daily life, a complete and largely independent Jewish existence. The internal division of powers in the community—into a political authority and a juridical one—caused this group to function as a miniature state. Even though they did not inhabit a territory of their own, the Jews enjoyed *their own life* in both senses of the phrase: they had erected structures of governance for themselves, and this enabled them to live as they saw fit. *Dina de malchuta dina*, the law of the Kingdom is the Law, proclaims the Talmud repeatedly, so as to establish by this principle the modes of relationship between the Jewish community and the society whose bosom they inhabited. And it was necessary to delineate, in miniscule detail, in which matters Jewish legality was to govern, and which, the “external” one. But, on account of this very fact, it was made clear in which areas the “law of the Kingdom” could not legislate on that which is specifically Jewish.

It was with the French Revolution and the Haskalah that this political autonomy faded: thus declared with pride, for example, the great rabbi of Paris, Isidore Lazar, in 1852: “We have proven that we are worthy of freedom, worthy of the title of citizens and that it is possible to be at once Israelite and Frenchman. The *Jewish people* have died out, their *national form* has died, but what has not died

⁴ Indeed, all cultures or groups are founded upon a variable but indispensable quota of segregation: In order for us to be “us,” it is necessary for us to differentiate ourselves from “the others.” The ancient cities were surrounded by walls that not only protected them from war faring enemies, but from foreign presences in general.

and never will die, is the *spirit* of Judaism, its principles and truths....” (Emphasis mine)

A little less than a century later history reveals that those “principles and truths” are not in the least alien to the Jew as a people and as a national form, that is, to their political existence—and not merely their “spiritual” one. The fact is that Lazar’s argument is based on an assumption that is a quite un-Jewish distinction, a distinction that originates with Christianity: that which divides spiritual life from civic life. Being a citizen and being Jewish do not even preclude one another, since one is a political category, that is a public one, and the other happens to be a religious and therefore private condition. This is another form of ghetto, of conversional self-abasement, of containment dressed up as liberty and modernity. Political autonomy was reborn with the foundation of the State of Israel, and, at the same time, with it there resurges a certain danger of the State turning into a ghetto in its less fructiferous fringes. With autonomy as a virtue in itself comes, symmetrically, the risk of a self-referential fundamentalism, that is, the temptations of autochthony, the illusion of absolute ownership, the demarcation and hierarchization of the inner and outer realms as fixed and immovable places, in sum, the schema of center and margins, norm and errancy, propriety and the improper. The risk, in other words, of thinking of Israel as “the” place of Jewishness, and the Diaspora as a devalued suburb in which, for reasons of circumstance, a second-class Judaism abodes, the Jews that *we still haven’t made into aliens*.

Israel can become a ghetto if it is considered in these terms, but at the same time, the gentile world, that seemed so attractive in the age of emancipation, is its diametric opposite, an anti-ghetto just as limiting and impoverishing. To be locked out: herein lies another way to lose one’s liberty. Claustrophobia and agoraphobia are the obverse and inverse of the same paralysis, that which results from giving the limits between the inner and the outer a substantial and static consistency.

Throughout the centuries, the Diaspora has been experienced as a punishment. It is the cyclically reiterated item, the re-edition of the expulsion from the Garden of Eden, anxiety over all things foreign, the old “Be ready to get out of here with nothing but the shirt on your back,” almost like a curse that brings us nearer to tragedy or intolerable fate. What lies out there for us? What warm remembrances

will nostalgia fabricate? Will there ever be a return, or is our parting forever and always to be our loss, grief and abyss?

Galut: uprooting, Diaspora. But—and perhaps not as paradoxically as it may seem—in *galut* we hear *legalot*, to discover, unwrap, unfold, a word that speaks, among other things, of the movement that enables the lecture, the unfolding of the Sefer Torah, the unrolling and opening of that which the text preserves. In this act of opening discovery becomes, can become, discovery as a certain kind of revelation, *gilui*. Moreover, it is precisely in exile that Revelation, *hitgalut*, occurs.⁵

The incidence of the same root shows the inextricable link between them. The Diaspora, then, is not, or not only, the place of uprooting and suffering, of loss and home-sickness, but also an occasion for manifestation and encounter with things unknown, just as it was for the Patriarchs. From this perspective it is no longer a matter of expiating the exile and redeeming an errancy, but of understanding transit as interpretation.

The ghetto, on the other hand, together with the nature of self-preservation, which doubtless implies and entails a shade of endogamy, and, as we know, the sinister makes its nest there also, whispering, an elusive ghost in the bowels of the familiar.

The fact of the matter is that departure from the ghetto does not imply-or does not only imply- a severance, but also the possibility of traveling further afield or across borders, of being *ivrim*, to return enriched, to permeate one's voice with other voices, one's own music with the varied tones of other melodies.

It is thus not a matter of “growth” exactly—with all the luminous resonance of progress that this term connotes—but rather of, as Spinoza might say, augmenting the potential for acting by means of good encounters, fecund com-positions of

⁵ *Hitgalut* means, literally, revelation, but applies only to God. *Gilui*, on the other hand, although translated as *discovery*, implies—as all discovery does—a certain flavor of revelation, not in a theological sense, but in reference to a truth that has remained hidden in the sense of *being as yet unread*. On the other hand *hitgalut* is a reflexive form: it is a case of a reveling oneself—perhaps demonstrating that all revelations are, above all else, a motion of self-comparison, a calling to which the subject must present him/herself, and, in that moment, discover him/herself as being for-the-other. (cf. Franz Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, University of Wisconsin Press, 2005 “If Revelation is the coming of the Law, does it not already contain—the term says it—the structure of uprooting, of going beyond oneself, of the alien?”)

desire in its incessant circulations, weaving a weft in which each stitch is the singular emergence of a complex and varied plural, each stitch is the expression of a power unfixable, inalienable, yet permitting infinite combinations in a displacement that is inherent, a potential attained by its own manifestation without ever coagulating into substance. The thought of Spinoza, Jew among Jews, is diasporic thought by its very structure, for it prevents—as does the reading of the Torah—the meaning of the written word from becoming saturated: Over and over, the essence of his system is realized in lateral development, in action, in moving and putting together new configurations like dunes in the desert. Essence, dissemination, Diaspora: ways to dispossess power and re-launch it as infinite potential, to prevent, ultimately, the appropriation of meaning by a single Babelic language and its becoming a blunt word in the service of authority.⁶

Horizontal non-propriety

Because, in sum, what is one's own? Which is the most intimate bone of Judaism? Is there, in fact, an *of itself* and *for its own sake*, or are we not incurably for-the-other, others unto ourselves, open and turned outwards, receptors of a gift that we must at the same time donate and transmit? Is not, therefore, our most characteristic aspect precisely the surrender of the characteristic, the alien, otherness?

If the community, as Esposito⁷ posits, is not defined by what individuals possess together but by the deficiency they share, a bottomless destiny upon which the common is interwoven, then it is not a case of a possession that can be snatched away from us as soon as we walk out the door, but of a shared debt, a fragile mode of existence that demands of us that we re-found ourselves again and again, re-weave the ties, re-sume. One of the ways in which Judaism is conceived and understands itself, the form it elected and in which I elect myself as being Jewish, is that of an existence open to the infinite and not closed off as a totality, involuted, or cloistered so as to avoid impurities.

⁶ On the relationship between language and power, cf. the illuminating text of Perla Sneh and Juan Carlos Cosaca, *La shoah en el siglo, del lenguaje del exterminio al exterminio del discurso*, ["The Shoah in the Century—From the Language of Extermination to the Extermination of Discourse"] Published by Xavier Bóveda, Buenos Aires, 1999 [no English translation available]

⁷ Cf. Roberto Esposito, *Communitas*, Published by Amorrortu, Buenos Aires, 2003 [no English translation available]

There are, in fact, no pure cultures, uncontaminated peoples, isolated existences, but well there is, and has been, the dream that such is possible. It is this dream that makes a chiasma of the two terms *ghetto* and world: If the ghetto, by virtue of being sheltered, constitutes a small world, the world is can become a ghetto, if *world* implies the cosmos, a closed totality governed by the laws of the marketplace and inhabited by consumers. In this ghettoized world even the spiritual, culture, observance or religious belief, education, and love become consumer goods, disposable contents, objects in an economy, which, on account of its own makeup, is unaware of the gift and razes all that is common. To break with the ghetto world, to break out, is not merely a matter of crossing the borderline of an area or neighborhood, but, fundamentally, to open one's existence to a dimension of otherness, that which we call *justice* and in which, in our crossing of the desert, our scriptures have been instructive since ancient times.