

David Taïeb

Eliane Amado Levy-Valensi: a post-Shoah Philosophy

Readers of Eliane Amado Levy-Valensi's work may be surprised to find few references to the Shoah, and very little analysis of the specific subject matter that the event provides for philosophical reflection. Her doctoral dissertation¹, already containing the issues and themes of her later work, might have provided the first opportunity for this, and indeed the expectation is supported by the dedication – “To my mother, who died at Auschwitz” – written at the top of the first page of this seminal work. A glance at the table of contents also reveals that it will deal with Jews, anti-Semitism and evil. But on reading the chapters in question, there is nothing, or almost nothing, on the Shoah.

The rest of her work is no exception to the rule – none of her subsequent publications specifically concern the Shoah, and their content refers to it only occasionally, and often allusively, while analyzing the actuality or destiny of the Jewish people. For example, in the first pages of *Isaac, gardien de son frère?* (Isaac, his brother's keeper?) Levy-Valensi writes: “at the recent congress held in Paris in 1967 on the genocide, a Soviet participant could be seen calling for an end to hate speech in Israel”.² A few pages later, she quotes a passage from *Tristes Tropiques* where Lévi-Strauss castigates those who are “incapable of tolerating the existence of others as others”, and whose only recourse is “the ‘negativization’ of others, considered as witnesses to a different faith and a different way of life”.³ This reference, which could very well have been used to describe the attitude of the Nazis during the Second World War, in fact concerns a certain form of “Muslim intolerance” that consists in asserting that Israel does not exist.

It is clear, by bringing together these two passages, that Levy-Valensi does not avoid the issue of genocide – her participation in the 1967 congress is sufficient testimony to that – but that her analysis of it must be sought between the lines of remarks that focus on something else. Moreover, the implicit nature of her treatment of the Shoah is reflected quite clearly in the expression that she uses to refer to it here: “the genocide”, in other words

the event that can be alluded to without being named.⁴ This observation can be extended to many other passages: when Levy-Valensi speaks of the Shoah, it is most often without speaking of it, or in what might appear as a form of restraint.⁵

There are of course reasons for this, two of which we will hypothesize. First, there are historical reasons: it was the start of the 1960s; the events of the Second World War were still recent, the wounds were still raw and the world was still dazed by the shock that it had suffered. In 1962, Auschwitz was not spoken of in the same way as we speak of Auschwitz today. Then there are personal reasons: Levy-Valensi was directly affected by the Shoah. She was forced to interrupt her studies and flee Paris to avoid deportation; she lost her mother in the concentration camps. It is understandable, then, that her words might have been prevented or obscured by her mourning for the victim she was before becoming a philosopher.

But it would be wrong to conclude from this that the Shoah is absent from her work. It would also be wrong to think that it appears as something unsaid, a repressed thought or a taboo. It is certainly present – not highly thematized or clearly identified, but present nonetheless. Beyond the few explicit references that do appear here and there, it is possible for a careful reader to discern the strands of a precise interpretation of the event and its implications. We will attempt to share a few that we have found as we delve more deeply into some her works.

The Shoah: a straightforward genocide?

First, let us note that for Levy-Valensi, the Shoah is not one genocide *among others*. But nor is it a genocide *unlike any other*, one that appears a permanently unsolvable and unalterable enigma. Levy-Valensi very quickly distances herself from the debate that sets those who believe in the incomparable uniqueness of the Shoah against those who are content to add it to the list of genocides and attempts at ethnic cleansing. She refuses to decide against these two interpretations, which are too incomplete, or against the practical but simplistic distinction between a difference in nature and difference in degree. The first interpretation does not allow lessons to be learned from the event on the general, or even universal, human level. The second refuses to view the genocide of the Jewish people in its radical specificity. Yet for her, the Shoah is an event with universal significance

by *virtue* of its specificity. Like Kant, whose work she reads attentively, Levy-Valensi perceives the singular as reconciling the universal and the particular.⁶ She regards the Shoah as a singular event in the sense that its particularity is what gives it a universal dimension: it is because the Jews *in particular* were its victims – and target – that its lessons are valid for *all* men. To understand it, we must show the close link that unites the concepts of “Jew” and “human” for her. We will do so a little later.

Although not explicitly stated, Levy-Valensi gives us lessons to learn from the event, and her analysis can be distinguished in these lessons like an imprint. It is in this sense that Levy-Valensi’s philosophy is a “post-Shoah” philosophy, a philosophy addressing a world that experienced the Shoah and was transformed by it. We say “addressing”, and not “describing”, because the work of Levy-Valensi carries a message. And this message is made necessary – urgent – by the attempted extermination of the Jewish people twenty years previously. In other words, she does not tell us what mankind was during the Shoah, or what mankind is after the Shoah, but what mankind *should be* after the Shoah. Her words should be read and understood as an appeal – an appeal that she addresses first to the Jews, because she believes it is they who must carry a message – *the* message – for all mankind.

But to convey it, Jews must first understand the message intended for them: then and only then can they be Jews. And for Levy-Valensi, being Jewish is the best way – perhaps even the only way – for the Jews to prevent the Shoah from continuing to exterminate them. Jews survived, of course, but the Jewish people will no longer exist if they cease to be Jewish. And man will no longer exist either if the Jew is no longer there to remind him of his humanity, or in other words if he is no longer confronted with the singularity of a particular existence that points toward the universal, because man is inhabited by the temptation to be something other or more than human, and it is the Jew who shows him the dimension of himself that he so dearly wants to escape. To put it another way, by doing his utmost to kill the Jew, man almost succeeded in killing himself. Anti-Semitism is a form of self-destruction, and putting it into action has an element of suicide.

We will attempt later to show, on one hand, the substance of the message that she addresses to the Jews, and on the other, that of the message which she believes Jews must address to mankind. But to grasp its sense and significance, it is crucial to observe that it is carried by a woman, and what is

more, by a Jewish woman. For Levy-Valensi, being a woman, like being Jewish, requires additional effort: the effort to accept and assert oneself as such. Having had to make this two-fold effort, she cannot be blamed for expecting others to do so: for a Jew to make the effort to be Jewish, for a woman to make the effort to be a woman, for a human to make the effort to be human.

To convince her readers of this necessity, Levy-Valensi draws on figures who each represent a stance that she considers inadequate. We will examine a few of these figures in this article, but one warrants particular attention as she seems to serve as a foil for Levy-Valensi herself: the figure of Simone Weil, born female, born Jewish and turned philosopher, barely ten years her senior, and whose path provides the perfect counter-example to what Levy-Valensi would try to become and to assert throughout her life.

The Case of Simone Weil

For Levy-Valensi, Simone Weil failed on two counts: she failed to be a woman, and failed to be Jewish. And it is doubtless this double failure that leads Levy-Valensi to regard her as an exemplary case, the concentration in a single human life of the exact antithesis to what should be the aim of every Jew and every woman. Levy-Valensi cannot find words harsh enough for the woman she presents as “a poignant example of consciousness alienated from its self-destructive power”, of “hatred” and of “non self-acceptance” leading to “the temptation of death”⁷. In her opinion, Simone Weil “hated herself as a woman” as much as she “hated herself as a Jew”⁸, and in doing so was guilty of a double betrayal.

The “Case of Simone Weil” certainly deserves separate study. Several authors since Levy-Valensi have considered the issue of her extremely difficult relationship with Judaism⁹. Some have attempted to show that the concepts of “selfhatred” or anti-Semitism do not explain the sometimes violent attitude of rejection adopted towards Judaism by Simone Weil. This is particularly the case with Robert Chenavier¹⁰, who believes that this rejection is explained by a “distortion” in Simone Weil’s method of reading the Bible¹¹, which made her “unable to bring her project into conformity with her vocation”. By contrast, Levy-Valensi’s analysis aims to establish that the root of this extreme reticence towards the text of the Bible is self-hatred, insofar as this text affirms the covenant between the

Jewish people and God, which Simone Weil attempted to escape by turning to Christ. Her determination not to show her femininity is a revealing indication of this point: an irreparable state of affairs that Simone Weil does not want and against which she fights with all her strength. This is the common ground shared by “being a woman” and “being Jewish”: they are immediately established as a given that neither the woman nor the Jew have the freedom to alter.

Thus, for Levy-Valensi, speaking of “selfhatred” does indeed explain the case of Simone Weil, provided that this self-hatred is no greater than the denial that constitutes it. This is why she feels that ignorance of Judaism is still a key element of its denial. In fact, it is on this point that the anti-Semite and the self-hating Jew agree: by ignoring the Jew, in themselves or in others, they deny him the objective reality to which he lays claim by virtue and right of his existence. And this ignorance cannot be justified by the Jew’s supposed “exoticism”, too remote or too different to be adequately grasped by the consciousness. For the philosopher, the Jew’s extreme familiarity and proximity make this excuse inadmissible. The Jew is a mirror held up before each individual. The only way for them not to see him is to avert their eyes.

Destruction and persecution

From this standpoint, the Shoah appears to be the most spectacular manifestation of this denial. If my view continues to be obstructed by what I work hard not to see or know, I must destroy it. Ignorance and destruction of the Jew result from the same attitude of rejection. In Levy-Valensi’s writing, the first is described as “the most elementary” form of anti-Semitism, and the second as its “paroxysm”. To ignore the Jew is to begin to destroy him; to destroy the Jew is to ignore him absolutely.

This parallel between ignorance, denial and destruction is crucial to understanding the particular status of the Shoah in the history of the Jewish people, because destruction is not persecution. The suffering inflicted on the Jews before the Nazi project’s implementation perfectly obeys scapegoat logic, which requires the continued existence of those who are persecuted.¹² It could not be more surprising that, in destroying the Jew, the Nazis were prepared to eliminate the ideal culprit previously used by other peoples to get through difficult times.

The fact that the Jews also suffered persecution during the Second World War may mean that the two forms of anti-Semitism – persecutory anti-Semitism and destructive anti-Semitism – coexisted during this period, or perhaps that there was a gradual shift from one to the other. It is up to historians to determine this. The fact remains, however, that anti-Semitism as described and analyzed by Levy-Valensi, using the psychological mechanism of denial, immediately places us on the side of what we have called “destructive anti-Semitism”. Her distinction between the elementary and the paroxysmal forms of anti-Semitism does not overlap with the distinction between persecution and Shoah. She does not provide a single frame of reference that can be applied equally to the pogroms, racial laws, social discrimination, humiliation and gas chambers. She specifically describes the consciousness that strives to eliminate the Jew, and starts to do so by ignoring him.

It is for this reason that Levy-Valensi’s philosophy is a “post-Shoah” philosophy, as we stated earlier, because it is a philosophy that views anti-Semitism as a destructive endeavor before seeing it as involving scapegoat logic. Yet only the Shoah – as the implementation of a project aiming to exterminate the Jewish people – could reveal this existing but previously unnoticed form of anti-Semitism. And this is what allows us to understand that the Shoah, while appearing to be absent from Levy-Valensi’s work, is in fact omnipresent in it.

As we have suggested, the denial of Judaism and the destructive endeavor that it provokes are not the prerogative of the anti-Semite. The “Case of Simone Weil” shows that a Jewish consciousness may strive to ignore and destroy itself as Jewish. However, it would be wrong to conclude that the workings of the anti-Semitic consciousness and of the self-hating or self-ashamed Jewish consciousness are strictly identical, or simply transposable. Both of course result from an attitude of denial, but towards an object that does not hold the same status for the consciousness. To show the difference between them, Levy-Valensi uses concepts borrowed from psychopathology, in particular the distinction between paranoid psychosis and schizophrenic psychosis.

Schizophrenia and paranoia

In *Le Dialogue psychanalytique* (Psychoanalytic Dialogue), Levy-Valensi describes paranoia and schizophrenia as pathological fixations by the

consciousness on one of two poles – the subject or the object – between which it should be able to continually fluctuate. This fluctuation, defined as “freedom of consciousness”¹³, is constantly threatened by the temptation of the absolute, which maintains the illusion of perfect coincidence between the subject and object. For Levy-Valensi, the consciousness is free only if it is able to seize “the moment when it detaches itself from the object of its fascination to attach itself to another”. This definition of freedom allows alienation to be defined, *e contrario*, as the permanent or too prolonged fixation by the consciousness on its object.

However, the manner in which the fixation occurs varies depending on which of the two poles it is inclined toward – the subject or the object. In the first case, alienation consists for the consciousness in “claiming to be ‘objective’, never fascinated by anything, never attached to anything, giving its support only to itself, narcissistically fascinated by its non-fascination”¹⁴. Paradoxically, a consciousness of this kind becomes narcissistic as a result of excessive concern for objectivity: “A means that mistakes itself for an end, objectivity pushed too far ultimately plunges the subject into pathological scruple, into the obsessive ritual of undefined verification.”¹⁵ Thus by objectifying the phenomena of the ego, the subject is doomed to paralysis: instead of understanding space and time as subjective facts of existence, it dissects and analyzes them, like Zeno’s Achilles who will never catch up to the tortoise. “The tortoise is not far away. To catch it, you need only walk forwards toward it. But to do so, you must move on solid ground and believe in the ground beneath you and in the time available for the action.”¹⁶ It is necessary to know how to “*not hold yourself back*”.

In opposition to this first form of alienation, where the subject itself becomes the object of its own fixation, we find the result of a fixation on the object as such, i.e. on the other pole. However, this does not necessarily mean that the consciousness disappears behind the object on which it sets its sights. On the contrary: in this second case, the fixation occurs when the subject projects injunctions originating from its own subjectivity *into things*. This projection leads the consciousness to nurture an obsession with the object while denying its “objective” dimension, its specificity. So this alienation, like the first, also results in a form of narcissism, but a narcissism that is the product of an entirely different relationship: in one case, the subject fixates on itself through excessive objectivity, and in the other it fixates on its objects through excessive subjectivity. This is the

difference between the schizophrenic consciousness, which sees itself *as* an object, and the paranoid consciousness, which sees itself *in* its objects.

Anti-Semitism and the ashamed Jew

These two attitudes are correlative and feed each other despite having opposite mechanisms. Levy-Valensi finds “an excellent example” of this reciprocity in the implicit dialogue that forms between the anti-Semite and what she refers to as “the ashamed Jew”. The first, following the paranoid pattern, projects his own evil onto the Jew, in complete self-ignorance and ignorance of others, impervious to any refutation by “objective” experience. The second, following the schizophrenic pattern, denies himself, “desperately attempting to reduce his original nature” in a claim to objectivity which, in reality, hides a “despair at being himself”¹⁷ that is caused by the hatred and contempt toward him. Thus, for example, the Jew who explains why he supported Pétain’s ideas: “I didn’t want to be against them simply because I was Jewish.” This attitude in turn feeds the conviction of the anti-Semite – as does everything, admittedly – who, moreover, finds this an ideal opportunity to hate the Jew who, just like him, ignores and hates himself:

An identical self-ignorance can be seen in both the anti-Semitic consciousness and the consciousness of the ‘ashamed’ Jew. But this ignorance is manifested in two opposite approaches: the anti-Semitic consciousness, being paranoid, avoids its own vertigo in order to over-assert itself in the excitement and disruption of subjectivity [...] By contrast, the unaccepted Jewish consciousness denies itself in a curious and significant claim to objectivity. Its temptation is much less violence than a fallacious happy medium.¹⁸

The Jew’s ambiguity toward himself

The two forms of alienation (paranoid and schizophrenic) described in *Le Dialogue psychanalytique* and their two corresponding figures (the anti-Semite and the ashamed Jew) are joined in *Les Niveaux de l’Etre* (The Levels of Being) by a third form and a third figure, as it were combining in one the two pathologies hitherto presented as distinct and obeying

opposite mechanisms. In this third case, the consciousness is inclined simultaneously toward both attitudes, subjectifying and objectifying. It is a single subject that is tempted at the same time by over-assertion and by self-negation. Levy-Valensi affords this phenomenon the status of a very specific alienation, which she calls “the Jew’s ambiguity toward himself”.

As she repeatedly suggests, the combination of the two elementary forms of alienation in the same consciousness originates in the alienation of another consciousness. It emerges reactively, in response to the behavior of an external consciousness of the paranoid type. And it is the power of this other consciousness that leads it to take up a position in relation to it, truly ambiguously, “combining denial and excessive self-assertion”¹⁹. This, particularly, is the decisive power that the anti-Semitic consciousness exercises over the Jewish consciousness: faced with the anti-Semite, the Jew is trapped in a dual situation where he asserts himself *against* speech that scorns and rejects him, resolutely proclaiming himself to be Jewish, at the same time as he internalizes this speech and develops a sense of shame at being Jewish. Thus the subject becomes equally ashamed and proud of who he is. He despises himself for being a Jew while priding himself on it. Excessive objectification merges with excessive subjectification, and the consciousness makes itself an unhappy, paranoid *and* schizophrenic consciousness.

Faced with the anti-Semitic consciousness, the Jewish consciousness is forced to alternately adopt various contradictory positions resulting from the same two-sided alienation: sometimes it “hardens”, sometimes it “attempts to forget itself”, sometimes it “endeavors to find compromises”²⁰. Each of these positions has a corresponding biblical or historical figure whose attitude and choices identify and illustrate the potential manifestations of the Jew’s ambiguity toward himself. We have already mentioned the figure of Simone Weil. As we have observed, she serves as a foil for Levy-Valensi, like a negative copy of herself, representing both the woman that she could have been and the woman that she does not want to be. Other figures, male and further removed in time or symbolic space, allow her to rephrase her position in language that is less loaded with personal or emotional connotations.

Figures of ambiguity

The first of these figures is Rabbi Akiba, who represents the hardening of the Jewish consciousness in the “proud assertion not only of itself, but also of the divine transcendental mission, even in martyrdom”²¹. Quite logically, it is the emperor Hadrian who is generally condemned for the martyrdom of Rabbi Akiba²², tortured to death with nine other rabbis to atone for the misdeeds of Jacob’s first ten sons, who were guilty of selling their brother Joseph to the Egyptians²³. Indeed, the Jewish tradition does not say that the suffering of an individual should be used to expiate the crimes committed by his ancestors. But Levy-Valensi also feels it is important to highlight the victim’s own participation in the scandal of his martyrdom. While his skin was being flayed with iron combs, Rabbi Akiba found the strength to recite the Shema Yisrael, the prayer proclaiming the oneness of God. And yet divine oneness was not visible in the suffering inflicted upon him.

The second figure is Jason the convert, haunted by “the shame of his name” and “the fear of being Jewish in the eyes of others”. To evoke him, Levy-Valensi quotes verses of a poem by Edmond Fleg: “Do not call me Joseph, I am now Jason / I have obtained myself a new foreskin / Do not call me Joseph, I am now Jason”²⁴. Jason represents the ashamed Jews who use “derisory and futile tricks”²⁵ to forget and make others forget their Jewish condition, many undergoing baptism and changing their names. It is clearly to this figure that Levy-Valensi relates the “Case of Simone Weil” mentioned earlier in this article.

The third figure, compromise, is represented by Flavius Josephus. It raises the possibility of a painful conflict between the temptation of denial and the temptation of over-assertion. Flavius Josephus exhibits all the characteristics of a divided consciousness: within this figure, Yosef ben Matityahu, who at the battle of Yodfat was able to drive his men to suicide to avoid the dishonor of surrender, clashes with his alter ego Titus Flavius, who became a Roman citizen, received a pension from the state and was full of gratitude towards his protectors. His constant desire to play the role of intermediary between his native people and his adopted people is most revealing: believing that he can be Jewish *and* Roman, he ends up becoming *the Romans’* Jew. His work, which includes an attempt to adapt Judaism to the Roman way of thinking²⁶ and a response to anti-Semitic attacks from his own camp²⁷, alternates between pure Roman propaganda

and an attempt at self-justification: Flavius Josephus defends himself for being Jewish as much as he defends himself for not being Jewish.

And the Shoah in all of this?

It may appear surprising that none of these figures are from the period of the Second World War: if, as we have repeatedly argued, Levy-Valensi's philosophy is a "post-Shoah" philosophy, why are her paradigms drawn not only from earlier periods, but also from periods characterized by persecutory anti-Semitism, and not destructive anti-Semitism?

This potential criticism can be addressed by recalling, first of all, that paradigms are by definition timeless: therefore they can still shed light on the period that they help to explain, even if they do not belong to it. Moreover, the figures chosen by Levy-Valensi perfectly fill this role in relation to the Shoah. This can easily be shown for the first and third figures: in condemning Rabbi Akiba's own complicity in his martyrdom, the philosopher takes a stand against those who interpreted the extermination of the Jewish people as an expression of God's will, intended to redeem the sins of the fathers through the suffering of the sons. Next, in condemning the duplicity of Flavius Josephus, she condemns that of all Jews who wavered between the temptation to resist and the temptation to collaborate. She herself points out that this mixed form of the Jew's ambiguity toward himself is able to appear in "times of crisis, from Flavius Josephus to the Marranos, and from the Marranos *to the recent period of clandestinity*"²⁸.

Finally, to reiterate an earlier point, although destructive anti-Semitism first became visible with the Shoah, this was not when it began to emerge. The project to exterminate the Jewish people was not implemented until the arrival of Nazism, of course, but the desire to destroy the Jew has always existed. Indeed, it is perhaps the characteristic feature of persecutory anti-Semitism: an endeavor that aims to destroy or negate Jews as individuals while maintaining their existence as a people. Rabbi Akiba, Jason and Flavius Josephus are paradigms, but they are also victims of typical cases of murder, whether real or symbolic.

However, the figure of Jason – of which the case of Simone Weil is an illustration – occupies a special place in the triptych of figures of ambiguity: indeed, it shows the fulfillment of a plan for the *total* destruction of the Jew by the Jew himself. For Levy-Valensi, this ignores the terms of

the covenant of election that irrevocably unites all Jews with God, and in so doing, fails in the mission that is incumbent on the Jewish people and on all of its individual members.

The mission of the Jewish people

The sense of this assertion can only be understood if we consider the substance of the Jewish people's mission, its watchword, in light of the circumstances in which it was received. To understand what may be scandalous to some about their message, we must study the particular nature of the Jewish people's "election": we must see that this election was imposed on them due to a lack of candidates, making them as much a cursed people as a chosen people. Referring to the teachings of the Talmudic tradition, Levy-Valensi highlights how the Revelation is something endured:

God gave the Torah to all the nations of the Earth, but the nations of the Earth took fright. The sons of Noah had accepted seven commandments, but unable to keep them, they entrusted them to Israel. Creation would have been destroyed if the Revelation, its *raison d'être*, had not been accepted by any nation. The Revelation is imposed on Israel; the election is not due to Israel's merits, but gives it a fate that sets it apart from other peoples.²⁹

This interpretation of the election lays to rest many prejudices about the Jews' pretension to believe that they are God's chosen people, but also allows its tragic dimension to be fully understood. It shows that God's choice is much less the conferment of a privilege than the exemplary and irrevocable assignment of a responsibility and a fate. "The Torah", writes Levy-Valensi,

is not the privilege of Israel, and it is for all humanity that it is chosen [...] The time of the Exodus clearly shows the inner turmoil of a people too weak for the mission incumbent on them, alternately faithful and unfaithful, sublime and disappointing, fighting step by step against their humanity even under the inspired breath of Moses. And rulers are astonished by this strange race of people who [...] pass so easily from denial to fervor. But is this not the instability of a soul of which more is asked than is in its power to give?³⁰

The Jewish people is no more capable than others of fulfilling the mission that God reserves for mankind. It is the one that remains when the others have failed.

Israel's curse is therefore in its very blessing, in this choice by God that condemns the Jews to be the people who have no choice, the people whose

freedom is comparable to that of the man confronted with the Stoic concept of fate: “to freely accept it or be dragged unwillingly”³¹. The Jew can only betray or remain faithful to his mission. By no means can he shrink from it. Yet it is precisely in this test, in the permanent injunction placed on him to accept everything or renounce everything, that nature is exceeded and humanity is achieved. In this respect, Levy-Valensi’s description of the moral dilemma faced by the tortured resister is particularly illuminating. It allows us to understand the Jew’s extreme humanity as a direct implication of the tragic dimension of his election:

Who has not been struck by the inhuman ordeal caused by the torture used during the war, for example, to extract confessions from those who resisted? The victim emerged as a traitor or a hero. In this decisive ordeal, there was no longer any room for man with his everyday nature, powerless goodwill and weaknesses. The test of suffering is always somewhat like this. Before it, man is merely nature; with it, he ceases to be or is fulfilled in an essentially new dimension. But the road to his salvation inevitably passes through the realm of pain.³²

From monster to symbol

The suffering of the tortured resister, like that of the persecuted Jew, is therefore less a physical suffering – although their physical suffering is certainly real – than the agony of a soul facing the need to choose between a traitor’s life and a hero’s death. Between, on one hand, living but “ceasing to be”, and on the other, “being fulfilled in a new dimension” but dying. For Levy-Valensi, it is at the very heart of this suffering, within this inhuman in-between, that the Jew’s excessive humanity shatters: the Jew is irreversibly human because he is condemned to be *neither* purely “natural” – nothing but a man – *nor* purely “supernatural” – more than a man – while being *both at the same time*, by fighting against each with the help of the other. This duality, which “results from the very election that requires a man to no longer be a man, and requires it in such a way that he cannot fail without being demeaned”³³, makes him a monster:

A monster in relation to the natural rules that govern the fate of nations. A monster to his own consciousness, which cannot ‘sleep the world’s sleep’. A monster to all humanity, who see scandal and defiance of their own laws in him before they are able to recognize the very sense of their

essential nature, the path to their own fulfillment, in him. A monster, too, in the terrible and everyday dilemma between faithfulness and denial – between the unavoidable exemplarity of salvation or disgrace.³⁴

But this monstrosity is also a message addressed to those who have not sworn an oath, to those – other peoples – who seem to be able to shrink from a mission that was not entrusted to them: the fate of Israel³⁵ is “the fate of all men, but it is in Israel that all men should learn to understand this fate”³⁶. In a manner of speaking, this fate is negative, because it consists in *not* shrinking from humanity, or in resisting the temptation to be something other than a man. The fate of all men is to remain faithful to God by remaining man – to live and to die “according to His will” – and it is because the Jew, by his exemplarity, reminds them constantly of their own fate, which they want to forget, that all men are exposed to the temptation of anti-Semitism:

Each man projects his own struggle against nature onto the Jews, and his hatred of the Jew is most often merely hatred of the fight that he wishes to avoid. Let us be according to nature! The Jew’s monstrosity disturbs the sleep of a humanity that, without the hero’s call, would not think of fully becoming itself.³⁷

It is in this sense that the Jew and his reality should be understood as a *symbol*. The Jew’s paradoxical exemplarity – “human to the limits of nature, and so as to surpass nature”³⁸ – makes the Jew a representation for the consciousness *before* making the Jew an object for the consciousness. It is not important to know whether Levy-Valensi is speaking of the Jew in the historical or biblical sense – descended from Abraham, Isaac and Jacob –, the halachic sense – born to a Jewish mother or converted to Judaism – or as determined by the Nuremberg Laws or the Law of Return. It is not important whether the reality behind the word “Jew” is objective or merely objectifiable. What is important, and what defines the Jew in Levy-Valensi’s work, is the function handed down to him – a function directly linked to the conditions of his election, which determines his place, not only among nations but also within the psychic apparatus, as a representation; a function that is eminently symbolic, in the sense that the Jew is ultimately nothing but a symbol for the consciousness.

The Jewish dilemma: to let oneself be destroyed or become authentic

In scapegoat logic, which characterizes most occurrences of Jewish persecution, the Jew is not strictly speaking a symbol. Of course, it could be asserted that he “symbolizes” or “represents” all the problems of which a society, at a given moment, is attempting to rid itself. But it would be more accurate to say that he is the object of a fantasy, that he takes on a role that in reality is not his: he *passes for* the responsible party, the culprit, the cause. He *serves as*, much more than he symbolizes. And yet destructive anti-Semitism does not lash out at this Jew. It attacks the Jew as a symbol, paradoxically more real than the Jew targeted by persecutory anti-Semitism. It is also this objective reality, the unquestionable existence of the symbol, that provokes the desire for destruction.

As we have said, the Shoah represents the moment in the long history of the suffering of the Jewish people when destructive anti-Semitism – the aim of which is the pure and simple destruction of the Jew, at the risk of forever depriving itself of an ideal culprit – suddenly became visible. What was unprecedented about the event, beyond its scope, was that something previously hidden was exposed and carried out systematically. The Jew discovered that others wanted to eliminate him even more than they wanted to hurt him. The anti-Semite discovered that he wanted the Jew to disappear, even more than he wanted him to suffer. And for good reason: the Jew symbolizes what every consciousness tirelessly attempts to shrink from. Human in the extreme, he reminds all individuals of the dimension of themselves that they strive with all their strength to forget. The Jew’s mission inevitably exposes him to the risk of death.

Faced with this risk, he has two options: either to participate in his own destruction by choosing to adopt the various positions of the Jew who is ambiguous toward himself, or to fully accept his identity and the mission that goes with it. Total acceptance thus finds itself in exact opposition to ambiguity, for which it is the sole remedy. It alone can allow the Jew to become what Levy-Valensi, using Sartre’s expression, calls “an authentic Jew”.

Jewish authenticity first consists in the Jew hearing for himself the message that he embodies, that is to say accepting it in the first sense of the word: taking *ownership* of it. It then consists in his accepting, in the second sense of the word, the task of conveying it: taking *responsibility* for it. Conversely, inauthenticity consists in remaining deaf to the message

or keeping it for himself. The authentic Jew is therefore the one who will fully honor the covenant of election, who will be faithful to the original oath that made him a Jew before the appearance of anti-Semitism, as if looking past the anti-Semite and finding, beyond anti-Semitism, his true birth certificate. This is because it is not anti-Semitism that is foremost: it is the Jew.

It is therefore the Jew's responsibility to achieve his own authenticity, without waiting for other peoples to give him permission to exist as he is. But this achievement is only possible among men, by engaging in a dialogue with them based on a fully accepted ownership of himself and his mission.

The "Colloques": a path towards authenticity

In this respect, the position occupied by Levy-Valensi in the post-war French intellectual landscape testifies to perfect consistency between her thinking and her actions. In 1957, she was among the organizers of the first *Colloque des intellectuels juifs de langue française* (Colloquium of French-speaking Jewish Intellectuals), united by the idea that the struggle against anti-Semitism must involve "the Jewish recovery of their identity"³⁹: in the 1950s, it was not possible to call oneself Jewish in the same way as before the war. Not only did the Shoah reveal the existence of a destructive anti-Semitism, it also led to a crisis of identity that Judaism must face. The war shattered Judaism's forms of assertion. Fragmented and divided, the Jewish consciousness must rediscover its unity. This was the main objective of the first *Colloques*, which Levy-Valensi co-directed. "One speaker after another", observes Perrine Simon-Nahum⁴⁰, "the same question resurfaces: how can one be Jewish after the Shoah? What substance should be given to the Jewish identity after the destruction of an entire people?"

As we have seen, Levy-Valensi's work first provides an indirect response to these questions. Her active participation in the *Colloques* makes this response more explicit, as she positions it in a line of thought with a "unit of reference" that she shares completely, namely that "it is as a Jew that the Jew must address the outside world"⁴¹. At the heart of this line of thought, Levy-Valensi's words make themselves heard through her refusal to accord the Shoah the significance of a seminal event. For her, the desire to destroy

Judaism has punctuated the entire history of philosophy: “If I were twenty years younger, I would rewrite the entire history of philosophy, showing at each stage the shadow, the absence of Judaism, glimpsed and then rejected, in every era and by every author in specific forms.”⁷⁴² In this sense, as we have said, the Shoah revealed more than it started.

Furthermore, Levy-Valensi’s decision to leave France and settle in Israel was prompted not by the Shoah but the Six Day War, even though the Shoah was needed to interpret the meaning of this event. The French government’s hostility towards Israel, thirty years after betraying French Jews’ confidence in the protection of their state, was enough to convince the founders of the *Colloques* – all except for Emmanuel Lévinas – to leave. Levy-Valensi arrived in Israel in 1968, at the same time as André Neher and Léon Askénazi. Their message was clear: anti-Zionism is the new face of anti-Semitism, and the recovery of the Jewish identity must henceforth involve an allegiance to Israel that goes beyond simple solidarity. For them, adopting Israeli nationality was “the completion of the process that led them, since the war, to envisage a new French Judaism”⁷⁴³. Levy-Valensi continued to travel to France to participate in the *Colloques*, but she stopped organizing them, and it was at Bar-Ilan University that she continued her career, giving up the renown that French universities appeared to promise.

Thus the choices made by Levy-Valensi, just a few years after the publication of *Les Niveaux de l’Etre*, testify to a desire to apply her concept of authenticity, to give it a personal, living and concrete form. First, her decision to go and live in Israel, to be closer to the place of election and to no longer have to define herself negatively, from the perspective of the anti-Semite. Next, her decision to practice the profession of psychoanalyst: for her, the Jew and the psychoanalyst are both preferred media for the transfer of alienated consciousness. Finally, her decision to initiate a dialogue for recognition with other religions, to allow Judaism to take its place among them and make its message heard. It is a dialogue that she conducted not only as a Jewish woman but also as an Israeli, the only way for her to no longer be “caught between being a scapegoat and survivor’s guilt”⁷⁴⁴. From then on her issues were those of French Jews settled in Israel, thinking that “follows the dual principle of settling and uprooting”⁷⁴⁵, and no longer those of the Jew who is only able to exist through those who wish to destroy him.

Conclusion: from the Shoah to the state of Israel?

The close link between the experience of the Shoah, the call for Jewish authenticity and the creation of the state of Israel that gradually becomes apparent in Levy-Valensi's writing needs no explanation. For her, the birth of Israel owes something to the Nazi attempt to exterminate the Jewish people, but not in order to counterbalance or compensate for it. The world did not incur a debt towards the Jews that can be erased or reduced by granting land. The Shoah made the existence of a Jewish state necessary, not in the eyes of mankind – guilty and looking to redeem itself – but first and foremost in the eyes of the Jews themselves, who are suddenly aware of the desire for destruction to which they may be subject, and who understand that the only valid response to this desire is to fully accept Judaism once more.

It can therefore be asserted, without too much risk of betraying Levy-Valensi's thinking, that the state of Israel has been necessary as long as destructive anti-Semitism has existed, i.e. since well before the Shoah, but that this necessity was not evident to the Jewish consciousness until after the Shoah, which spectacularly brought to light a very old temptation. The true vocation of the state of Israel is therefore not to right the wrongs suffered by the Jews, nor to serve as a refuge for them, nor even to protect them. It is to offer them a place where the path toward authenticity no longer encounters the obstacle of anti-Semitism, a place where they can fortify their faith before going to meet and enter into a dialogue with others in order to convey the message they carry.

Notes

- 1 *Les Niveaux de l'Être. La connaissance et le mal* (Paris: PUF, 1962). Subsequently referred to as *Les Niveaux de l'Être*.
- 2 *Isaac, gardien de son frère? Implications inconscientes du dialogue israélo-arabe* (Toulouse: Privat, 1968), 12.
- 3 *Tristes Tropiques*, English translation by John & Doreen Weightman (London: Penguin, 2011), 404. Quoted by Eliane Amado Levy-Valensi 18.
- 4 As we will see later, we do not believe this expression to indicate that Eliane Amado Levy-Valensi denies the existence of other genocides.
- 5 These remarks apply only to Eliane Amado Levy-Valensi's writing, i.e. to what constitutes her work in the strict sense of the word, representative of subjects chosen deliberately by her, and not to her contributions at the *Colloques des intellectuels juifs*

- de langue française* (Colloquia of French-speaking Jewish Intellectuals). Although the latter led to publications, they nevertheless remain oral contributions or prompted by topics chosen collectively by the organizers.
- 6 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, English translation by J. M. D. Meiklejohn, Transcendental Analytic, book 1, ch. 1, section II, § 9.
 - 7 *Les Niveaux de l'Être*, 585–6. Simone Weil, born to a Jewish family in 1909, gradually moved towards Christianity before experiencing a revelation in 1938.
 - 8 *Les Niveaux de l'Être*, 586.
 - 9 In particular, see Paul GINIEWSKI, *Simone Weil ou la haine de soi* (Paris: Berg International, 1978) and Martine LEBOVICI's article "Simone Weil, la mal née", in *La Haine de soi. Difficiles identités*, ed. Esther Benbassa and Jean-Christophe Attias (Brussels: Complexe, 2000), 229–52. A chapter is also dedicated to Simone Weil in George STEINER's work, *No Passion Spent: Essays 1978–1995*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), and the *Cahiers Simone Weil* include a report entitled "Simone Weil antisémite? Un sujet qui fâche?" in their September 2007 edition.
 - 10 *Simone Weil. Attention to the Real*, English translation by Bernard E. Doering (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2012).
 - 11 Here we are referring to what Christians call the Old Testament.
 - 12 This is not to say that no Jews died during the persecutions that preceded Nazism, simply that these persecutions – unlike Nazism – did not aim to eliminate the existence of the entire Jewish people, who were intended to be able to continue to fill the role of scapegoat.
 - 13 *Le Dialogue psychanalytique* (Paris: PUF, 1962) 3.
 - 14 *Ibid.*
 - 15 *Ibid.*, 43.
 - 16 *Ibid.*, 44.
 - 17 *Ibid.*, 46.
 - 18 *Ibid.*, 45.
 - 19 *Les Niveaux de l'Être*, 581.
 - 20 *Ibid.*
 - 21 *Ibid.*
 - 22 *Jerusalem Talmud*, Berakhot 9 (14b) and the *Babylonian Talmud*, Berakhot 61b and Menahot 29b.
 - 23 Genesis, chapter 37.
 - 24 Edmond FLEG, "Le nouveau Jason", *Ecoute Israël* (Paris: Flammarion, 1954), 193.
 - 25 *Les Niveaux de l'Être*, 582.
 - 26 *Les Antiquités juives* (Paris: Cerf, 1992).
 - 27 *Contre Apion* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1930).
 - 28 *Les Niveaux de l'Être*, 582. Our emphasis.
 - 29 *Les Niveaux de l'Être*, 567.
 - 30 *Ibid.*, 567–8.
 - 31 *Ibid.*, 562.
 - 32 *Les Niveaux de l'Être*, 548.
 - 33 *Ibid.*, chapter III, §3, 568.
 - 34 *Ibid.*

- 35 Read: the Jewish people.
- 36 Ibid.
- 37 Ibid., 569.
- 38 Ibid., 552.
- 39 Perrine SIMON-NAHUM, “Penser le judaïsme. Retour sur les Colloques des intellectuels juifs de langue française (1957–2000)”, in *Archives juives* 38 (2005/1): 81.
- 40 Ibid., 83.
- 41 Ibid., 87.
- 42 Statement by Eliane Amado Levy-Valensi at the thirteenth *Colloque des intellectuels juifs de langue française* (Colloquium of French-speaking Jewish Intellectuals) in 1972.
- 43 Perrine SIMON-NAHUM, *op.cit.*, 91.
- 44 Ibid., 84.
- 45 Ibid., 89.

