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Judeities

Questions for Jacques Derrida

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"I could think of another Abraham for myself."

This is a citation. "I could think of another Abraham for myself." One could translate it slightly differently. For the word think, one could substitute "imagine" or "conceive": "Ich könnte mir einen anderen Abraham denken"; "I could, for myself, aside within myself [à part en moi], as for myself, imagine, conceive the fiction of another Abraham."


Perhaps, perhaps then, there would be more than one Abraham. And this is what would have to be thought (denken). Perhaps.

A few weeks ago, in New York, the largest Jewish city in the world, sometimes said to be inhabited by more Jews than Israel itself, Avital Ronell, an American friend and colleague, herself of European and Israeli origins, drew my attention to this apologue or fable of Kafka, which I am about to interpret in my own fashion, still otherwise, and obliquely, elliptically. As brief as it may be, this fiction stages not only another Abraham (eines anderen Abraham) but more than one other Abraham, at least two others. It is as if the serial multiplicity of the "more than one [plus d'un]" inscribed itself upon the
very name of Abraham. The narrator first says, “I could think of another Abraham for myself,” and goes on to evoke a first other, a first second Abraham, in order to say, “I do not see the leap” he would have had to make in order to show himself ready to obey God on Mount Moriah—the word leap here confirming what is otherwise well known, namely, that Kafka had read Kierkegaard. The narrator then adds: “But there would be another Abraham [auch ein anderer Abraham].” This other other Abraham was ready to respond and answer the call, or to answer to the test of the election, but he was not sure of having been called, not sure that it was he himself and not another. He was not sure that it was he, in fact, who was the elected, and not another. He was afraid of being ridiculous, like someone who, hard of hearing, would come to answer “yes,” “here I am,” without having been called himself, without having been designated; or who would rush to answer the call addressed to another, like a bad student, for example, who from the back of the class, Kafka says, would think that he heard his own name, whereas the teacher had honored another, having meant to reward only the very best student of the class. True, the end of the parable leaves open another possibility: perhaps the teacher intended to stage a confusing test between the two names, or between the two chosen ones, in order to punish the bad student.

Let us leave here, as an exergue, these other Abrahams. Later on I will sketch one of the interpretations that tempt me most. Yet everything that I will risk here could be understood as an indirect response to Kafka’s madness, and a post-script to another reading I have offered elsewhere, in Donner la mort, of Isaac’s binding and, already, of more than one Abraham: multiple and sometimes fictitious Abrahams, from Kierkegaard to Levinas.

I must begin now to expose myself without sheltering myself behind these fictions.

Is this possible?

I do not believe, in any case, that it would be possible or justifiable for me, within me, and in the final analysis, to distinguish today between two stories. I say specifically “in the final analysis,” two stories in the final analysis, there where the analytic account would be difficult, and perhaps interminable.

What stories? How to count them and give account of them, or better yet, how to be accountable for them? How, and by what right, can one distinguish, for example, between that which, in my experience, touches in part my “being-jew [être juif]” at its most intimate, its most obscure, its most illegible (however one takes this “being-jew,” and later I will in fact complicate the stakes of this expression—one cannot do everything at once) and in part that which, let us say, seems to belong in a more legible fashion to my work, the public work of a good or a bad student, which does not necessarily, nor always, bear visible traces of my “being-jew,” whether it concerns itself with writing, teaching, ethics, law or politics, or civic behavior, or whether it concerns itself with philosophy or with literature.

And yet tonight I will act for awhile as if these two orders were distinct, to seek to determine later on, here or elsewhere, at least as a disputable hypothesis, the rule of what passes [ce qui passe] from one to the other, the rule of what occurs [ce qui se passe] between the two, and for which I would have, in sum, to respond.

Yes, it is a matter, once again, of responding. And yes, of responding “yes.”

Without even naming Abraham, prior to daring to issue a summons toward the immense figure of the patriarch presumed to respond to the calling of his name, “yes, here I am,” “I am here,” “I am ready,” one must know (and this is the first Abraham teaching, prior to any other) that if everything begins for us with the response, if everything begins with the “yes” implied in all responses (“yes, I respond,” “yes, here I am,” even if the response is “no”), then any response, even the most modest, the most mundane, of responses, remains an acquiescence given to some self-presentation. Even if, during the response, in the determined content of a reply, I were to say “no”; even if I were to declare “no, no, and no. I am not here, I will not come, I am leaving, I withdraw. I desert, I am going to the desert. I am not one of your own nor am I facing you,” or “no, I deny, abuse, refuse, disavow, and so on,” well then, this “no” will have said “yes,” “yes, I am here to speak to you, I am addressing you in order to answer ‘no,’ here I am to deny, disavow, or refuse.”

One can draw quite a few consequences from this paradox and from this prevalence of an originary “yes”: from this precedence that makes the “yes” an undeniable vigilance [veille], the inheritance of a place [lieu] that cannot be uprooted; from this “yes” that comes up through every “no” on this earth and survives through all the negative modalities of disavowal (but what does it mean, to “disavow”? this will perhaps be my ultimate question), through all the negativities of questioning, doubt, skepticism, critique, and sometimes, of a particular and hasty interpretation of deconstruction. One can draw
consequences, and I have done so more than once, on many occasions and in many places. I will have to reaffirm this, no doubt, during the next few days.

It would thus be, once again, a matter of responding, of answering oneself, in one's name, or for one's name. Of answering-to [de répondre-à] (to whom? to someone, always, to a few, to everybody [à tous et à toutes], to you), of answering-before, therefore, and of answering-for (for one's acts and words, for oneself, for one's name; for example, for one's being-jew or not, etc.). In short, it would be a matter of taking responsibility, a responsibility that we know, in advance, exceeds all measure. How to respond? And first of all, how to respond to questions: for example, to these questions [that have been announced, and addressed to me, on the issues that Joseph Cohen and Raphael Zagury-Orly have so prudently, so daringly, called "judeïtes", in the plural? Judeïties that would remain, above all, in question.

Early on, and for a long time I have trembled, I still tremble, before the title of this conference (questions addressed to me! and concerning judeïties!) and never has the privilege of a conference apparently addressed to me intimidated, worried, or flustered me this much, to the point of leaving me with the feeling that a grave misunderstanding threatened to make me forget how much I feel, and will always feel, out of place in speaking of it; out of place, misplaced, decentered, very far from what could resemble the thing itself or the center of said questions, the multiple questions oriented toward plural judeïties and whatever could be implied by this word, judeïties, in the plural, to which I shall return. Is it really to me, at the back of the title of this conference (questions addressed to me! and concerning judeïties!), to which I shall return. Is it really to me, at the back of the class, in the last row, that such questions must be addressed or destined? On the matter of judeïty or judaïsm, the insufficiency, the inadequacy, the failure (all mine, and of which I have not finished speaking) are graver and, I fear, more significant than a simple incompetence, an incompetence and a lack of culture, to which, by the way, I at the same time also confess. But I will have to explain myself, and so I must at least respond, precisely, I must answer for all these faults and failures. I must do so, and I owe it to you [Je le dois, je vous le dois]: I must answer them to you, before you, all of you who are here, before those who remarkably honor me by partaking in this experience, assuming its meaning with courage and generosity, while alone I would never have even imagined its possibility. Respond I must, in truth, and I owe this first to my hosts in this place, particularly to Mr. Elalouf and Mr. Marciano⁴ and then to express my anxious gratitude to Joseph Cohen and Raphael Zagury-Orly, who have done so much, who have succeeded in overcoming my doubts and my skepticism, in order to give to this encounter all its opportunities, that is to say, all its risks. I will no doubt speak of risks more than of opportunities, even if I do not believe it possible to separate the two, risk taken and opportunity given [le risque couru et la chance donnée], no more here than anywhere else. One can no more dissociate opportunity from risk in the case, for example, of peace negotiations—if, that is, one truly wants peace. For example, in Israel and Palestine.

Here, however, it is about more than one dissociation that I would like to begin by saying a few words. The dissociations I am thinking of are not necessarily threats to the social or communal bond, since a certain rupture, a certain departure, a certain separation, an interruption of the bond, a radical un-binding remains also, I believe, the condition of the social bond as such. I mean that of love. Of living love and of lifelong love of life [de l'amour à vie de la vie], the lively and exposed affirmation of life [de l'affirmation à vie de la vie]. So it is that evil, risk, as well as opportunity, have to do neither with dissociation nor with its opposite, but with the experience of a dissociation that is at once possible, necessary, and impossible. An alternative at once promised and denied.

A few figures of this alternative, of this necessary but impossible dissociation, already present themselves. Three, at least.

First, a dissociation between persons, the grammatical marks of the person, and what they indicate of what was still being called until fairly recently the subject—a word I would prefer to restrict to its purely grammatical meaning. I designate in this way the dissociation between the first, second, and third persons, singular and plural, male and female (I, you, he/she, we, you, they [dis/elles]): I am jewish, you are jewish, he/she is jewish [juif(ve)], you are jewish [juif(ve)], we are Jewish, they are Jewish, and so on. How do these persons translate into each other and is it possible? Can one authorize oneself to move from "you are Jewish" [tu es juif ou juive] to a "therefore I am" [donc je le suis]?

Second, the dissociation, and therefore the alternative, between authenticity and inauthenticity (I do not say truth and un-truth): authentic Jew / inauthentic Jew. Can one trust in this distinction, of which,
as I will recall, Sartre made a famous and troubled use right after the war?

Third, the dissociation between *judeïté* [jewishness] (the word invoked, in the plural, in the title of this conference: *judeïtés*) and *judaïsme*. Can one trust in the alternative (e.g., *jewishness/judaism*), of which I will recall the letters of nobility conferred on it by Yosef Yerushalmi in his book on Freud’s Moses?

But before defending with arguments my doubts regarding the trustworthiness [*faisabilité*] of these three distinctions (I/you, I/we, we/you, I/we/they [*tu-elle*], etc.: authentic/inauthentic; *jewishness/judaism*), allow me to whisper the following, with the tone of a more or less innocent confidence. I hardly dare here—I hardly dared even yesterday—to take the floor, as one says. And no doubt I will only do so to confide in you that which in me, for a long time now, feels—in a place such as this, in a place defined in this way, before a topic so formulated, before the “jewish” thing [*devant la chose “juive”*], at once, precisely, entrusted, and condemned, to silence [confié—et condamné au mutisme]. Yes, entrusted as much as condemned. Both entrusted to silence, in the sense that one says entrusted for safekeeping, entrusted to a silence that keeps and guards so long as one keeps and guards it. It is a bit as if a certain way of keeping quiet, of silencing oneself [*une certaine façon de taire ou de se taire*], as if a certain secret had always represented, regarding Judaism, regarding Jewishness, regarding the condition or the situation of being Jew, regarding this appellation that I hardly dare, precisely, to call mine—it is as if such silence, a determined silence and not just any silence (for I have never, absolutely never, hidden my Jewish descent, and I have always been honored to claim it), as if nonetheless such obstinate reserve had represented a kind of guard, a kind of care-taking, of safekeeping: a silence that one protects and that protects, a secret that perhaps keeps from Judaism [*garde du judaïsme*], but keeps as well a certain Jewishness in oneself—here in me.7 One knows the profound link—it is not only an etymological one—that can be found between keeping guard and truth [*la garde et la vérité*]. As if—a paradox that I will not stop unfolding and that summarizes all the torment of my life—I had to keep myself from Judaism [*me garder du judaïsme*] in order to retain within myself something that I provisionally call Jewishness. The phrase, the contradictory injunction, that would thus have ordered my life seemed to say to me, in French: “garde-toi du judaïsme—ou même de la judéïté.” Keep yourself from it in order to keep some of it, keep yourself from it, guard yourself from being Jewish in order to keep yourself Jewish or to keep and guard the Jew in you. Guard yourself from and take care of the Jew in you [*prends garde au Juif en toi*]. Watch and watch out [*re-garde*], be vigilant, be watchful, and do not be Jewish at any price. Even if you are alone and the last to be Jewish at this price, look twice before claiming a communal, even national or especially state-national, solidarity and before speaking, before taking sides and taking a stand as a Jew.

Is all of this authentic? I will return to the abysmal ground of this word *authentic*, which is anything but innocent.

To guard the silence that guards me, such would be the order—which I understand almost in the religious sense of a community, or rather a non-community, of a solitude of withdrawal from the world—the order to which I would have been entrusted forever, almost forever, a bit the way one entrusts or commits an orphan, a pupil of I don’t know what nation anymore, even less what nation-state, a lost child—but who perhaps still gives way to the obscure weakness of feeling as if a bit chosen for this being in perdition [*étre en pérdition*]. Called, at the risk of a terrifying misunderstanding about the proper name.

This watch [*garde*] over the secret to which I seem to have been entrusted, or this watch over the confided secret, a secret so much larger and so much graver than I—it is as if I had received a mission to be faithful to it, so long as a proper word about it were not given or dictated [*donnée ou ordonnée*] to me, a speech that I would have to invent as much as discover, encounter within myself outside myself [*rencontrer en moi hors de moi*], and defend at all cost. I do not believe, I am not sure, far from it, that the time has come. And I know that were it to come one day, the decision would not be mine, and the certainty would never be secure. A call worthy of that name, a call of the name worthy of the name, must give room to no certainty on the side of the addressee. Failing that, it is not a call.

I was speaking of silence and of mutism, the stubborn silence to which—entrusted to it as I was—I, so I surmised, condemned. By whom, by what, where and how? Those are my questions. For if trust, if the confidence of having-been-entrusted, through a kind of secret election, though in its essence uncertain, always ready for an apocalyptic or a derisive misunderstanding, an election that above all would not be the election of a people—a counter-election, therefore,
the counter-example of election—if, then, I have always, almost always, felt that what has destined, dedicated, and devoted me [ce qui m’a voué, dévoué, adonné] to the law of such a silence was the promised chance of a salvation without salvation that came from I don’t know where, well then, it is nonetheless the case that I have felt simultaneously, in-dissociably, under house arrest, even denounced, condemned, damned by the same obscure consciousness of election, of fatal choice by which a power, transcendent and without face, was driving me to silence, striking me with muteness as one inflicts an infirmity, a wound or a plague, since birth or almost since birth. The silence of which I speak was, then, and still is, both chosen and not chosen, undecidably decided by me without me, by the other in me. At the endless risk of a tragic or laughable misunderstanding.

To be condemned or damned [condamné ou damné] is to have to serve a sentence, to repay a damage (damnum), a lesion, a fault, a wrong that was committed, or a wrong for which one is a priori indicted, accused (“charged,” as one says in English). What fault, what damage, what lesion, what wound? This is perhaps the open question, the question that no more closes than does a scar, and that has always, almost always, haunted my mutism, cutting off my speech, pushing, pushing away, and holding fast to my words on the edge of all language. And here as well, on the edge of what I am tempted to say, I will let myself be guided by a question regarding that question: Why the big enigma, the quasi-universal and ontological thematic of an a priori guilt or responsibility, of an originary debt, a congenital wrong (which one finds everywhere, notably among so-called Christian, anti-Christian, or atheist thinkers, like Kierkegaard or Heidegger)? Why has the universal argument of this singular indictment come for me always, almost always, obscurely, as if stuck to the question of my belonging without belonging to Jewishness or to Judaism? (Again, I leave for later my questions regarding this distinction.)

Tonight, I feel that I will have to avow or disavow this “je ne sais quoi” that has almost always devoted me, entrusted and condemned me, to a “keeping quiet [le taire].” I would, at least, have to pretend to break the silence, if only to state one more time—and I will never say it enough—my anxious gratitude to those who have taken the initiative of inventing such a dangerous encounter, one that for me remains still a bit unimaginable. I would be lying, of course, if I claimed that today is the first time that I speak in public of my being—or my quasi-being—Jew, or of my unbelievable belonging to Judaism. I have often ventured this, most of all in the past decade, in numerous places that I will not enumerate. And yet, every time I have done so, I have only appeared to do so [j’ai seulement paru le faire]. In truth, by the detour of more or less calculated ruses, of generally deliberate ellipses, which were intended to be learned [et qui se voulaient savantes], by way of a phenomenological play of suspension, quotation marks and parentheses, I avoided doing fully what I was then doing: un-signing what I was signing [de dé-signer ce que je signais]. Is there a category for thinking and formalizing this gesture, which consists in avoiding without avoiding, in disavowing the very avowal? I do not know. Will it be called denial, inauthenticity (I will return to this word in a moment), a double game? My feeling is that none of these words is adequate to master the “Jewish” example or case of which I speak. But that this problematic must be rethought starting from that case, or from the abyss into which it carries everything, including the value of exemplarity.

During the time that preceded this encounter, and even yesterday, I have asked myself whether I should speak of these questions in a scholarly, philosophical, exegetical, or “deconstructive” manner. Without renouncing doing so later on, for example, during the discussions, and since I have done so elsewhere, it seems preferable to expose myself more crudely, for example, by asking myself, by trying to remind myself, by recalling myself tout court, and for that by recalling myself, to myself, how the word Jew (before “Judaism” and, most of all, before “Jewishness”) arrived, how it reached me like an arrival [comme un arrivant] or a first arrival, in the language of my childhood, landing in the French language of the Algeria of my first sentences. I will not reach, tonight—the occasion does not lend itself to it—such anamnesis regarding the arrival of “Jew” in my language, of this word that remains incredible [inouï] to me, deeper and more profound in me than my own name, more elementary and more indelible than any other in the world, than the “yes” from which I started and from which I have said that it is impossible to part or depart, from which everything, in truth, proceeds, closer to my body than an article of clothing, than my body itself.

But we know that with the interrogation of a word, of the history of a word, of our relation to a vocabulary, to the vocation or the con-vocation of a word [vocable], the temptation, the impossible desire, is to identify a first time, the occurrence without precedent of an appellation so new and then so unique that it resembles the appearance of a proper name. What was, for me, such an epiphany of the word Jew in my Algerian childhood?
Answering this kind of question is easier, if not always possible, when dealing with actual proper names identified with persons. In that case, we are guided by a reference, we know who is called by the appellation, and misunderstandings concerning that person are improbable. We always believe we know when such and such a name or surname of a person appeared for the first time—most often along with its referent. It is much more difficult, for me truly impossible, when dealing with words—names or not—that are, as one says, common: adjectives or common nouns.

Now, there are two appellations about which I have never managed to know, to know anything at all, and most of all to know how they came to me or whether they constituted names, common nouns or proper names. These are, so far as I know, the only two words about which I have relentlessly sought to find out, in the darkness of my memory, where, when, and how their epiphany came to light for me, gave birth for me—as far as I am concerned.

These two appellations, these two words that are neither common nor proper, are not “Daddy” and “Mommy,” but God—and Jew. In “Circumcision,” I have alluded at least once to the anxious amnesia that surrounds the first epiphany of the word Dieu (in French, for it is in French, of a French word that I always speak). I will therefore not return to it directly, nor will I revisit what I have risked writing, in a less autobiographical mode, regarding the name God in numerous texts. But as for the word jew, I do not believe I heard it first in my family, nor ever as a neutral designation meant to classify, even less to identify a belonging to a social, ethnic, or religious community. I believe I heard it at school in El Biar, already charged with what, in Latin, one could call an insult [injur], injuria, in English, injury, both an insult, a wound, and an injustice, a denial of right rather than the right to belong to a legitimate group. Before understanding any of it, I received this word like a blow, a denunciation, a de-legitimation prior to any right, prior to any legality. A blow struck [un coup porté] against me, but a blow that I would henceforth have to carry and incorporate [porter, comporter] forever in the very essence of my most singularly signed and assigned behavior [comportement]. It is as if I had to countersign the blow thus struck prior even to any possible memory. This word, this performative address (“Jew,” that is, almost inevitably, as if it were readily understood as “dirty Jew!”), this apostrophe was, remains, and carries, older than the claim [comtat], more archaic than any constative, the figure of a wounding

arrow, of a weapon or a projectile that has sunk into your body, once and for all and without the possibility of ever uprooting it. It adheres to your body and pulls it toward itself from within, as would a fishing hook or a harpoon lodged inside you, by way of the cutting and wet edge, the body of each of its letters, j.e.w. One can, afterward, assume this word, treat it in a thousand different ways, think it honorable to subscribe to it, to sign and countersign it. But, for me at least, it guards and keeps the mark of this assignation, of this unveiling that denounces, even of this originary accusation, this guilt or responsibility, granted dissymmetrically prior to any fault or act. And to speak honorably of this word jew—and by honorably, I mean measuring oneself by what is worthy of that name or of that adjective in the audible and visible forms of its syllables, in the turbulent life of each of its letters, in the tumultuous movement of its oral pronunciation and of its graphic destiny—the j and the oui [yes] of juif, between the sui [am] of je sui [I am], je sui juif [I am jew], the juste [barely, only, just, or: rightful, just] of “je suis juste en tant que Juif [as a Jew, I am just or: I am only to the extent that I am Jew],” or “je suis juste un Juif [I am just a Jew, no more than a Jew],” or: “I am just a Juif par out-dire qui s'entend à être juste un Juif juste, plus juste que la justice, et qui doit exiger pour le Juif d'être plus juste que la justice, qu'on soit avec lui et qu'il soit pour les autres plus juste, oui que le droit et la justice, etc. [yes, just a Jew who enjoys being just and more just than justice or law, yes, I am barely a Jew by hear-say who has heard of, who understands himself as being, no more than a just Jew, more just than justice, and who must demand for the Jew that he be more just than justice; that one be with him and that he be for the others more just, yes, than law and justice, etc.]” One would have to appeal to a force of poetic invention and memory, to a power of invention like the boldness of anamnesis. One would need art, or the genius of an archaeologist of the phantasm, the courage of childhood, too, of which I do not feel capable tonight—and which, I fear, neither the setting, the time, nor the space are available to us in such a conference and according to the laws of its genre.

Two brief remarks here, where interminable speeches would be required.
1. On the one hand, every time I have had to address seriously, if in a different mode, within the history of philosophy and of onto-theology, for example, in Nietzsche, Heidegger, or Levinas, and in many others as well, this theme of an originary guilt or incrimination, a guilt or a responsibility (Schuldigsein, as the Germans can luckily say in one word), the theme of a debt, an indebtedness, a being-indebted, all originary, prior to any contract, prior to contracting anything: well then, every time I have addressed this great philosophical problematic, I would see returning, from the bottomless ground of memory, this experience of dissymmetric assignation of being-jew, coupled immediately with what has become, for me, the immense and the most suspect, the most problematical, resource, one before which anyone, and therefore the Jew among others (I dare not say the Jew par excellence), must remain watchful, on guard, precisely: the cunning resource of exemplarism—which I will no doubt speak again. Here, exemplarism would consist in acknowledging, or claiming to identify, in what one calls the Jew the exemplary figure of a universal structure of the living human, to wit, this being originally indebted, responsible, guilty. As if election or counter-election consisted in having been chosen as guardian of a truth, a law, an essence, in truth here, of a universal responsibility. The more Jewish the Jew [plus le Juif est juif], the more he would represent the universality of human responsibility for man, and the more he would have to respond to it, to answer for it. Such exemplarism is a formidable temptation—to which many have surrendered, even Celan. It operates in every modern nationalism, nationalism never having been the claim to particularity or to an irreducible difference but rather a vocation for universal exemplarity, and therefore for a responsibility without limits, for every one and in front of every one, living and dead, a responsibility that is historically incarnated in this difference (one could give a thousand examples; I will not do so, keeping this question, for now, together with that of a thought of election, of that of a people or of an individual, there where it communicates with the immense, grave, painful, and terrible question of the state of Israel—yesterday, today, and tomorrow—a question that I intend neither to run from nor precipitously to broach here. I will return to this, then, and no doubt we will discuss it tomorrow night with Claude Lanzmann, and yet again on the following day).

Under the heading of exemplarity, and above all of what I have repeatedly called the counter-example, when I play without playing, in a notebook from 1976 quoted in “Circumfession,” at calling myself “the last and the least of the Jews [le dernier des Juifs],” I introduce myself both as the least Jewish, the most unworthy Jew, the last to deserve the title of authentic Jew, and at the same time, because of all this, by reason of a force of rupture that uproots and universalizes the place [lieu], the local, the familial, the communal, the national, and so on, he who plays at playing the role of the most Jewish of all, the last and therefore the only survivor fated to assume the legacy of generations, to save the response or responsibility before the assignation, or before the election, always at risk of taking himself for another, something that belongs to the essence of an experience of election; as if the least could do the most, but also as if (you will have noted, no doubt, that I often have recourse to the “as if,” and I do so intentionally, without playing, without being facile, because I believe that a certain perhaps of the as if, the poetical or the literary, in sum, lies at the heart of what I want to entrust to you)—as if the one who disavowed the most, and who appeared to betray the dogmas of belonging, be it a belonging to the community, the religion, even to the people, the nation and the state, and so on—as if this individual alone represented the last demand, the hyperbolic request of the very thing he appears to betray by perjuring himself. Hence this law that comes upon me, a law that, appearing antinomian, dictated to me, in a precipicous and obscure fashion, in a kind of light whose rays are unbending, the hyper-formalized formula of a destiny devoted to the secret—and that is why I play seriously, more and more, with the figure of the marrano: the less you show yourself as Jewish, the more and better Jew you will be. The more radically you break with a certain dogmatism of the place or of the bond [du lieu ou du lien] (communal, national, religious, of the state), the more you will be faithful to the hyperbolic, excessive [démesure] demand, to the hubris, perhaps, of a universal and disproportionate responsibility toward the singularity of every other (“every other is wholly other [tou autre ou tout autre]” is what I responded to Levinas one day, and I will perhaps say later what the hardly controllable stakes of this expression are, an expression that can barely be translated and is perhaps perverse). I speak to myself, then, I address to myself an apostrophe that seems to come to me from the site of a responsibility without limits, that is to say, hyper-ethical, hyper-political, hyper-philosophical, a responsibility the ferment of which—“you understood this immediately,” I said to myself—burns at the most irredentist core of what calls itself “Jew.” Henceforth, one had to grant the terrifying consequence of
this superlative antinomy: the least is the most, the least is the para-
doxical condition of the most, a certain experience of perjury is the
painful and originary enduring of faithfulness. (I have explained this
better in *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas* and elsewhere, as the theme of
perjury is among those to which I have stayed the most faithful, and
here I would have to speak—as I did one day, by thus entitling a
common meditation with Arab and Muslim friends in Rabat—of a
"fidélité à plus d’un [faithfulness to more than one, or: collective
faithfulness]," faithfulness to more than one remaining this impossi-
bile and necessary chance that one would have to be "worthy of in-
heriting [mériter d’hériter].") This experience is even more cruel, for I
asked myself, and I ask myself still, whether I should not free myself
from an unpleasant narcissistic complicity and from this remainder
of exemplarism, which would let me believe in some law of hyper-
bole, in this inversion of hyperbole that, in the end, for the last,
makes "the least" into "the most," in this hubris of the law that would
still be exemplarily Jewish and would pass through the body, even
the uncircumcised body, of the Jewish man, through the memory of old
Abraham, still another, when the covenant named him anew in order
to make him the father of nations. From this narcissistic and exem-
plarist temptation, from this subtle, twisted and difficult [retorse],
and ego-centered interpretation of election—which can lead, one knows
that too, to state nationalism in its most violent forms, even militaris-
tic and colonial—one also had to free and emancipate oneself
through deracination; one even had to oppose this temptation, pre-
cisely in the name of the same demand for a universal and hyperbolic
justice, a justice that traverses but also exceeds law.

Tomorrow, in a more narrative mode, and no doubt the day after
tomorrow, beyond narrative, I shall perhaps try to describe the para-
doxical effects of such experiences from my Algerian childhood. I
have already spoken of them elsewhere: the constant, general, and
virulent anti-Semitism of colonial Algeria, its aggravation, its own
overbidding during the war, which preceded and went beyond the
politics of Vichy, the loss of French citizenship, the status of indige-
nous Jew, the exclusion of all Jewish children and teachers from edu-
cational institutions without a whisper of protest on the part of the
other teachers—at least on the side of the French, since native Algeri-
ans sometimes showed more solidarity with the Jews in this ordeal,
and so on. In spite of the painful gravity of it, all this was in no way
comparable to the tragedy of European Jews or even French Jews,
a monstrous tragedy of which we knew nothing and about which

later, for this very reason, my compassion and my horrified indigna-
tion were and remain such as must move a universal conscience rather
than that of a Jew affected in his own kin [plutôt que celle d’un
Juif touché dans les siens]. Ultimately, the paradoxical effect I wanted
to describe schematically is that my suffering as a persecuted young
Jew (common enough, after all, and not comparable to those en-
dured in Europe—something that adds to all the reserve and decency
that prevent me from speaking of it), this suffering has no doubt
killed in me an elementary confidence in any community, in any fu-
sional gregariousness, whatever its nature, and beginning of course
with any anti-Semitic herding that alleges ethnic, religious, or na-
tional roots and of which my trained vigilance knows how to recog-
nize the signs and decipher the symptoms with a promptness that I
would dare call terrifying (I sometimes wonder whether the deci-
phering of the anti-Semitic symptom, as well as of the entire system
of connotations that indissociably accompanies it, was not the first
corpus I learned to interpret, as if I only knew how to read—others
would say, how to "deconstruct"—because of having first learned to
read, to deconstruct even, anti-Semitism). But the same suffering
and the same compulsion to decipher the symptom have also, para-
doxically and simultaneously, cautioned me against community and
communitarianism in general, beginning with reactive solidarity, as
fusional and sometimes not less gregarious than what constituted my
Jewish environment. As early as the age of ten (the expulsion from
school and the highpoint of official and authorized anti-Semitism in
Algeria), an obscure feeling took shape in me, at first uncultivated,
then more and more reasoned, of interrupted belonging, a relation
vexed from both sides: from the side of the declared enemy, of course,
the anti-Semite, but also from the side of "my own [du côté des miens],"
if I may say so. I will speak later of what the consequences were for
me and for a kind of political philosophy that began to develop wildly
in me, and continues to do so, toward all community, toward all Jew-
ish culture, be it Sephardi or above all Ashkenazi; toward the family,
the people, and the communal sentiment, whether it be national or
state-national. Of course, this anxious vigilance of a stranger within,
this insomniac distrust, has not failed to come up in respect to the still
exemplary phenomenon that is the state of Israel, and all the kinds of
violence that have marked its young history, the very principle and
the conditions of its founding as the politics that, in a more or less
continuous fashion, have governed its destiny—and still do so. The
childhood and adolescence I am evoking here have coincided in time
with the beginnings and then the creation of this state, both so singular and so similar to all others, while the Zionist call was resonating loudly in Algeria after the war. Rightly or wrongly, I have never felt the obligation, the ability, or the wisdom to respond to this call, but I will try to say later, in as just, complex, and prudent, as well as honest, a way as possible, the reasons that I have given myself, that I still give myself in my concerned and noncomplacent judgments about the state of Israel. Yesterday, the day before yesterday, and today. Concerned judgments, certainly, numbed by anxiety and compassion, but judgments that refuse complacency and that address themselves both to the justice I believe is owed to Israel and its survival, as a matter of course, and to the justice that one expects from Israel, and that a Jew, more and better than any other, even before any other, would have the right to hope for from Israel. The day before yesterday and tomorrow.

All that I would like to emphasize for now is the retreat and trenchment [retrauchement] of which I speak, a retreat, a caesura that appeared to decide itself, to carve itself within the very wound, within the wound that will not heal [la blessure non cicatrisable], that anti-Semitism has left in me, and a retreat outside of all community, including the one that was called my own, a merciless withdrawal that I felt already, and that I still feel, at once, at the same time, as less Jewish and more Jewish than the Jew, as scarily Jewish and as superlatively Jewish as possible, more than Jew [plus que Juif], exemplarily Jewish, but also hyperbolically Jew, when I was honing its cultivation to the point of mistrusting even the exemplarist temptation—not to mention the even more difficult and problematical language of election. This overbidding of an excess that never stops, that pursues and persecutes itself, the most becoming incomparably the least, or the other, a superlative more than a comparative—I have found it everywhere; it has found me everywhere, and one could locate a thousand signs in writings and teachings, in arguments that I did not direct—neither in appearance, nor in reality—toward the theme of any Jewish question. I will perhaps give some examples in the discussions that will follow.

2. On the other hand, something in me was already living the wound and the retreat of which I just spoke—the first event of which I located in the experience of anti-Semitic violence in the French Algeria of the 1940s—already living these as a trauma at once decisive, determining, inaugural, and already secondary. I mean to say already second, already consecutive and assigned by a law, that is to say, by a nonmemorable and immemorial repetition. I will say nothing of it here, mainly for lack of time, but were I to do so, I would speak of what this retreat would have to do—or not—with the memory without memory of circumcision. The texts I have published, since the 1960s, and not only those that mention it explicitly, such as Gla sensation, "Shibboleth," or "Circumfession," all consign an indefinitely insomniac vigil over the event called "circumcision," my circumcision, the one that took place only once but of which I have attempted to demonstrate that it inscribed repetition from its first act onward. (A friend asked me whether I thought, as I had told her earlier, that this conference risked being a second circumcision for me. I answered her as firmly as imprudently, "no"—a "no" that I leave to your interpretation. Does it mean that a circumcision worthy of that name must take place and cannot but take place once and only once? Or that I have decided to make sure that it does not happen again? Or that circumcision takes place more than once the moment it first takes place [plus d'une fois dès la première fois]?)

To remain with the skeletal logic of this destiny or this destinexence, as I sometimes put it, I will only remark that the dissociation, the retreat, and the hyperbole of this overbidding (the more than = the less and other than), this axiomatics of "I am the last and the least of the Jews," far from reassuring me within distinctions and oppositions, has done nothing but render impossible and illegitimate all distinctions and oppositions. On the contrary, this experience has sharpened my reasoned mistrust of borders and oppositional distinctions (whether conceptual or not), and thus has pushed me to elaborate a deconstruction as well as an ethics of decision, an ethics of responsibility, exposed to the endurance of the undecidable, to the law of my decision as decision of the other in me, dedicated and devoted [coste, dévouée] to aporia, to a not-being-able-to or not-being-obligated-to [au ne-pas-pouvoir ou au ne-pas-dévoir] trust in an oppositional border between two, for example, between two concepts that are apparently dissociable. The first paradox or the principal aporia has to do with the fact that the experience of dissociation or of a disseminal heterogeneity is the very thing that forbids dissociation from anchoring itself or being lulled into an oppositional distinction, into a decidable border or a reassuring difference.

I come therefore, and finally, to the three distinctions or alternatives announced earlier (Jew/Jew authentic/inauthentic, Jewishness/Judaism), which you can already feel I hold to be untenable.
1. First. Before I even come close to the word *jewishness* *[judéité]*, to the plural form, and to the differences that announce themselves in it, I will not have been the only one to recall that there is Jew and Jew. “Jew”—is that an adjective? Is it a noun? Can one *convert*, that is to say, translate, without remainder a sentence such as *je suis juif*, a proposition in which the adjective *juif* is an attribute thus *attributed* (but attributed by whom, in the first place? and who, here, says “I”?). can one innocently convert such a *je suis juif* into this wholly other sentence, “je suis un Juif,” the attributed attribute becoming an assumed name, and demanding of French this time to be capitalized? I note in passing that these questions, in their grammatical form, are mostly troubling in French where the adjective and the name *juif* are homophones, if not homonyms. This is not true in English or in German. We will have to return to this question of the “French Jew.” Not to mention that the attribute thus *attributed*, *juif*, whether adjective or noun, can designate what one calls, in Cartesian and post-Cartesian philosophy, an essential or principal attribute on the one hand, and a secondary attribute or mode, on the other.

Before any other kind of conversion—of this type or any other—there is one, also grammatical in appearance, that I—and I have every reason to assume that any other Jew will have, like me—found *problematical*, even impossible. This is the conversion that would symmetrically turn the proposition *tu es mon juif*, *vous êtes des juifs*, or J*huive(s)* [you are (a) Jew, Jewish] (noun or adjective, singular or plural, male or female) into the apparently reciprocal proposition: “donc je suis J/Peuif, donc nous sommes J/Peufs—or J/Peuive(s) [therefore I am (a) Jew or Jewish, therefore we are Jews or Jewish (male or female)].”

I have so far spoken only of the first and second persons, but the third persons have no doubt *already* insinuated themselves into the scene or into the waiting room. Let us enjoy this grace period, for whom knows what will befall us next.

This reciprocating conversion of the *you* [*du tu ou du vous*] into an “I” or a “we” is *problematical*, even impossible. It is not sufficient that I be told or that I be assigned a “you are (a) Jew” in order for me to subscribe and say “yes, then, since you say so, I am (a) Jew, *ergo Judaeus sum*—or *judae sum*, and I am indeed) the Jew or the Jewess that you say or believe that I am.” Saying this is not necessarily, it is above all not, to follow, in spite of the temptation, Sartre’s *Reflections on the Jewish Question* [*translated as Anti-Semite and Jew*], a book that mattered very much to me, in the 1950s, as we know it continued to matter for the young French Jews of the next generation. It is a book that is, as always, both so intelligent and so naive, a well-intentioned and generous book, which one must read, even if this is done less now than before, which one must re-read in its “situation” at that time. It is also a book the logic of which—one that Sartre also called, precisely, the “situation”—turns rapidly around this proposition: “The Jew is a man whom other men consider a Jew: that is the simple truth from which we must start.” A truth that is a bit simple, indeed. As if it sufficed for the other to tell me “you are jew or a Jew” for me to be born to my alleged identity as a Jew, to what Sartre calls therefore my *situation* as Jew: “Thus the Jew is in the situation of a Jew because he lives in the midst of a society that takes him for a Jew [*pour Juif*]” (72/88). Or yet again:

What is it, then, that serves to keep a semblance of unity in the Jewish community? To reply to this question, we must come back to the idea of *situation*. It is neither their past, their religion, nor their soil that unites the sons of Israel. If they have a common bond, if all of them deserve the name of Jew [*tous les nom de Juif*], it is because they have in common the situation of a Jew, that is, they live in a community which takes them for Jews. (67/81)

And a bit further: “In this sense the democrat is right as against the anti-Semite for it is the anti-Semite who *makes* the Jew” (69/84). It is not that Sartre’s axiom holds no truth at all regarding what is called the “situation” (and like others, at the first reading of this book, as a teenager, I believed that I recognized [*reconnaître*] here, gratefully [*avec reconnaissances*], precisely my experience of said situation, while asking myself already why—a question of good sense—it was these particular individuals and not others that society arbitrarily made into Jews), but before speaking a little more about what I find a bit simple, in fact, in an analysis so necessary after all, I will raise what concerns the third person. Sartre always speaks of the Jews in the third person, and he evokes, as we will hear, the emergence of the third person for the Jewish child himself.

Yet what will have infinitely complicated the course of my reading of this very French book, from the beginning of the 1950s, is not only the recourse to a distinction then so confident, which came from Heidegger, between authenticity and inauthenticity (authentic jew and inauthentic jew). And I thus approach the second border I had...
Jacques Derrida

2. Second. What worried and, in truth, discouraged my confident reading of these *Reflections on the Jewish Question* is first of all the fact that Sartre determines and confidently limits his discourse by asserting that he will restrict his analysis to the Jews of France, even to the French Jew. This limitation logically proceeds from the concept of "situation," which is the guiding thread and the organizing concept of this entire discourse. Sartre writes: "If I wish to know who the Jew is, I must first inquire into the situation surrounding him, since he is a being in a situation. I should say that I shall limit my description to the Jews in France for it is the problem of the French Jew that is our problem" (60/73).11 (Some of the pages of this book are dated October 1944 [71/86], prior to the discovery of Auschwitz, and there would be much to say about Sartre's perception then of what had just occurred in Europe—but let us leave that aside). Here, then, one finds excluded from the analysis not only all non-French Jews—following, in sum, a methodological and situational border quite clearly decidable, but terribly and so artificially, conventionally restrictive, unjustifiable, in truth, in such a singular case—but also, and equally out of range [horizon], if I may say so, are all these strange, nonforeign Jews [tous ces étrangers Juifs non-étrangers] who, like me, if I dare say so, like the Jews of Algeria of my generation, were in a thousand ways, undecidably, neither French nor non-French. And this indecision of the border had to do not only with citizenship, or with the fact that "we" had lost and then found again, between 1940 and 1944, a young citizenship that was granted less than a century earlier by the Crémieux Decree of 1870. This turbulence regarding French citizenship was complicated, in an abyssal manner, for those who were called, during the war and for a large part of my adolescence, "indigenous Jews" of Algeria (I have made this somewhat clear in *Monolingualism of the Other* and in "Circumfession"), regarding religion, language, culture, the very singular sequence of a colonial history whose kind, as I have tried to demonstrate, was unique in the world. I am one of those who feel both French, very French through and through (without being certain, I have explained that elsewhere as well, that I could say, like Hannah Arendt about the German language, "French is my only fatherland," even though language, French, in the irredentism of its most untranslatable idiom, is at bottom the passionate body of all my passions, even if this body often devotes itself to silence). French through and through, then, but at the same time one must accommodate this, one must address this dissociation, radically eradicated, cultivating the uprootedness, if I may say so, but without any desire to grow roots elsewhere, in some community or identifiable nation-state. I hope to say this better later, but it is certain that without this experience I would not have had the same access, nor perhaps any access at all, to the ethico-political motifs that have occupied me since long ago around what I have called a "new International," beyond even cosmopolitanism (that is to say, a citizenship of the world, against which I have nothing, of course, on the contrary, only that it still implies, as citizenship, the rootedness of the political and of democracy in a territory and state), or around what I have named the desert in the desert, khôrâ, messianicity without messianism, or the im-possible as the only possible event, for example, in the un-conditionality of the gift, of forgiveness, of testimony, of hospitality, and so on. All these motifs are, I hope, coherent, and in any case, they bear affinity with the experience that remains singularly mine, and with a destiny that was sealed from childhood of a little French Jew doubled with a little indigenous Jew of Algeria, an Algeria badly named or over-named [mal-nommée ou sur-nommée] French Algeria, being less and less so, and which this child barely knew, in sum, except in time of war, from one war to another, of one war, the other.

I was readying myself to clarify, then, how Sartre, himself speaking of Jews in the third person, was also describing the emergence of the third person in the little French Jew himself, at the origin of the consciousness of the French Jewish child. I will not yet hurry toward the great universal question of the third, which later became for me an essential site of reading, of interpretation, and of debate with Levinas, the thought and memory of whom I do not want to delay saluting here, for a thousand all too obvious reasons. Without insisting upon what Sartre's thought may recall for me, as for many others, of my childhood, it is to argue another question, namely, that of the distinction between authentic Jew and inauthentic Jew, that I will cite a passage from *Reflections on the Jewish Question*. Sartre writes here, in italics, the expression "special name." The name *Jew* is a "special name." For my part, I will emphasize, without further commentary, *together* the third person and the trans-generational or genealogical logic and the "strange and uncanny [louche et inquietant]"12 or "murky [troublant]" words, which beckon toward what...
Freud or Heidegger regularly thematize under the name of Unheimlichkeit (the uncanny [familier etrangé] of what is at once at home and not at home, intimate and strange, domestic and foreign, as if unheimlich meant, 'in sum, "jew"—both for the anti-Semites and for the philo-Semites, and, above all or finally, for the so-called Jews themselves: what is a so-called Jew [un soi-distant Juif]? here, finally, is perhaps my only question). I will finally underscore what Sartre evokes lightly, as if in passing, as if it concerned a pedagogical figure, destined to help better understand, to wit, the allusion to the sexual violence of a primal scene, when the child, or rather, a boy, a "little Jew" rather than a little Jewess, sees his parents making love. It is from this precocious experience, which Sartre successively calls "truth," "discovery," and "revelation," that Jewish children feel themselves—here again are Sartre's more or less calculated words—"separated," "cut off [retranchées]." Here, then, is a kind of primal scene during which the revelation of a truth cuts and cuts off [tranche et retranche], leaving nothing but traces of trouble in identity, the distinction between inside and outside, the at-home and the not-at-home: "someday they [Jewish children] must learn the truth: sometimes from the smiles of those who surround them, sometimes from rumor or insult" (75/91). (If I could allow myself to interrupt this citation for a brief remark, I would clarify that, in my case, which I believe to be very common to many Jewish children, it was first of all "through insults," through wounding apostrophes that led me to understand that shame can precede the fault and remain foreign to any possible avowal or disavowal. The insult or injury, prior to qualified injustice but like an elementary injustice, the inflicted wound, "injury," was indissociable from the word jew, uttered in French or in Arabic, the same word, name or adjective, the same attribute then incomprehensible and keeping, perhaps forever, some kernel of unintelligible darkness [quelque noyau de nuit inintelligible], between "jew" and "just," anti-jew and injustice, the same word, jew, constituting, as I said, in the cutting and excising experience [l'expérience tranche et retranchante] of the same cruelty, at once the weapon and the wound, the blade of the knife and the wound forever open.)

The later the discovery, the more violent the shock. Suddenly they perceive that others know something about them that they don't know; that people apply to them this strange and uncanny term that is not used in their own family. They feel themselves separated, cut off from the society of the normal children who run and play tranquilly and securely around them—those lucky children who have no special name. And they return home, they look at their father, they think: "Is he a Jew too?" and their respect for him is poisoned. How can they fail to keep the marks of this first revelation all their life? There have been hundreds of descriptions of the disturbance [troubles] which occur in a child when he suddenly discovers that his parents have sexual relations. But what must happen to the little Jew when he steals a glance at his parents and thinks: "They are Jews." (75–76/92; Sartre emphasizes only the phrase "special name.")

In what Sartre analyzes as a sociologist or a historian of a particular situation, that of the so-called or alleged, the said Jews, one could easily recognize—I will not do so here—the exemplary weave of a universal structure. I will also neglect, for lack of time, the lexicon of the cutting off [retranchement] ("They feel themselves separated, cut off from the society of the normal children") and the pedagogy of an Oedipal scenario—Oedipus being here the one who responds to the name of man, as always, but, Sartre would say, here he is a man, the condition of a man without human nature: "a child when he suddenly discovers that his parents have sexual relations." This remark will later be followed by a strange reference to Oedipus' daughter, Sophocles' Antigone, and to the advice given to her by Greek wisdom: "modesty," "silence," "patience" in misfortune, all virtues that, Sartre explains, could lead the inauthentic Jew toward anti-Semitism and masochism (109/132). I will only note the constitutive dissymmetry implied by the law of what announces to the Jew his own identity or his rapport with himself. The "here I am," the "I am Jewish," resonate first of all as the accusative of a heteronomous response to the order or the injunction of the other to whom the "I" of the "I am Jewish" is first of all the hostage. "I" is not the first to know that "I am Jewish." The path is clear now to go on and conclude that I am always the last [le dernier], the last to know. But you will no doubt have recognized in this heteronomous dissymmetry of the hostage that I am [de l'étage que je suis], the very trait, the universal features that Levinas gives to ethics in general, as metaphysics or first philosophy—and against ontology. There again is posed the great question of an exemplarist temptation, and we could be tempted to analyze here a configuration, which is quite French—and generational—a configuration of discourses that are, indeed, different, but all analogous in the attention they direct toward heteronomy and the subjection of
Jacques Derrida

Abraham, the Other

Jews authentically to become what they are. Yet following his own
beyond the concept if Sartre did not so much want to convince the
and inauthentic seriously, because it had to appeal to at least one
a non-concept, could be interesting, it could lead to a thinking be­
sition of the Jews in France."

Sartre emphasizes again an as such, which beckons [fait signe], as
always, toward the self-identity of sense, of essence, of oneself,
toward an ipseity in general. Toward its autonomy. Like the word
authentic itself. Yet when he must define this self-identity, this self-
identity of the Jew, Sartre cannot avoid this apohatic form, this
rhetoric, some have said, of "negative theology." Erasing all possible
predicates, he transforms the concept of Jew into a non-concept,
without any attribute that a Jew could attribute to himself, that is to
say, that he could assume or claim. This gesture, to make of the Jew
a non-concept, could be interesting, it could lead to a thinking be­
yond the concept if Sartre did not so much want to convince the
Jews authentically to become what they are. Yet following his own
reasoning, a Jew, in sum, and an authentic Jew, cannot even speak of himself as a Jew; he cannot define himself, present himself, say "here I am," without misunderstanding. This is because of the following—I quote this passage again:

What is it, then, that serves to keep a semblance of unity [I emphasize semblance as I will underscore, in a moment, the word quasi] in the Jewish community? To reply to this question, we must come back to the idea of situation. It is neither their past, their religion, nor their soil that unites the sons of Israel. If they have a common bond, if all of them deserve the name of Jew, it is because they have in common the situation of a Jew, that is, they live in a community which takes them for Jews. (67/81)

Since they are not Jewish in the truth of their being but only taken as such in a "semblance of unity," one could only escape this absurd circle by determining why the community in the midst of which they live takes these particular individuals, rather than others, to be Jews. Sartre, however, does not offer any answer to this question; he even deprives himself of the principle that would enable such an answer, since all the reasons that would be available to non-Jews for calling anyone jew are unacceptable and justly discredited by Sartre.

A. Indeed, at times he makes a strange use of the words jewish race—words about which it is difficult to decide whether or not he assumes them for his own account (e.g., in the passage where, speaking in the name of the human and protesting against what would be an inhumane measure, Sartre ends up saying that man does not exist). He evokes a politics of forced assimilation and, while protesting, clarifies that:

It would be necessary to supplement it with a policy of mixed marriages and a rigorous interdiction against Jewish religious practices—in particular, circumcision. I say quite simply: these measures would be inhumane... No democracy can seek the integration of the Jews at such a cost. Moreover, such a procedure could be advocated only by inauthentic Jews who are prey to a crisis of anti-Semitism; it aims at nothing but [rien moins que; I suppose that Sartre wanted to say "nothing less than" (rien de moins que)] the liquidation of the Jewish race. It represents an extreme form of the tendency we have noticed in the democrat, a tendency purely and simply to eradicate [supprimer] the Jew for the benefit of man. But man does not exist. There are Jews, Protestants, Catholics; there are Frenchmen, Englishmen, Germans; there are whites, blacks, yellows. (144-45/174-75)

B. At other times, on the contrary, and in order to avoid both affirming and denying some essential and proper feature of Jewishness or of Judaism, Sartre makes a singular appeal to the value of an "as if" or a "quasi," against which I have nothing, and which I have myself cultivated, if differently and for other ends, but of which one can at least say that it ruins the credit that we are asked to grant to authenticity and to the concept of authenticity. How could Sartre himself believe in it, when he twice uses the small and terrible word quasi? "The Jewish community is neither national nor international, neither religious, nor ethnic, nor political: it is a quasi-historical community. What makes the Jew is his concrete situation; what unites him to other Jews is the identity of their situations. This quasi-historical body should not be considered a foreign element in society" (145/176).

Even if, in another logic, which was never Sartre's, one were to take seriously this "quasi" in order to draw numerous consequences (something I have attempted to do elsewhere from another point of view and regarding other examples, which I will not evoke here in order not to deviate from my purpose), well then, this Sartrian description of the Jew and of the Jewish community, of its "semblance of unity" and of its "quasi" historicity, remains. I would say euphemistically, light [léger]. Even more so on the part of a philosopher who claims to concern himself with history, with situation and condition. The concept of history that orients this book is very vaguely Marxist and revolutionary. It leaves out [bore jeu] any other approach to historicity (internal and external) of, let us say in order to remain prudent, Jewish memory and law. Sartre appears to have acknowledged, at the end of his life, the ignorance—not to say the méconnaissance—of tradition, of Jewish traditions, to which his book testifies in the days immediately following the war.

In the same stroke, the Jew who is called upon to become authentic, authentically historical, has no choice but to resolve himself to a quasi-authenticity. Besides, the definition, this time, of the inauthentic Jew is enough to make all the Jews of the world—the authentic, the inauthentic, and a few others as well—scream, at the moment when
Sartre, in the condescending tone of concession, declares himself ready to accept this inauthentic Jew “as such,” in what he calls the “national society”:

We have described objectively, perhaps severely, the traits of the inauthentic Jew. There is not one of them that is opposed to his assimilation as such [again, emphasized by Sartre] in the national society. On the contrary [and here is the description of the inauthentic Jew], his rationalism, his critical spirit, his dream of a contractual society and of universal brotherhood, his humanism—all these qualities make him something like [comme] an indispensable leaven in that society. (146/176-77)

This figure [silhouette] of the inauthentic Jew (rationalism, critical spirit, humanism) in which so many non-Jews and Jews would like to recognize themselves, implies that authentic Jews are, for their part, strangers to rationalism, critical spirit, and humanism. It is understandable that many among them were indignant.

Let us not go further in the direction of edification. My intention here, you understand very well, is not to criticize Sartre. While paying him the homage he deserves, and associating myself with the testimonies of gratitude that many Jews have addressed to him, my concern would rather be to show the essential difficulty that can be found, when facing a certain logic, a powerful logic that is perhaps philosophy itself, in signing (and what one demands of a responsible signature is that it be original and authentic), in underwriting and in countersigning [à souvigner et à contresigner] an utterance of the type: “Me, I am jew” (authentic or inauthentic—or quasi-authentic), in knowing and meaning what one appears to be saying. Of this essential difficulty, I want less to indict Sartre’s discourse (even if I indeed do find its logic and its rhetoric to be quite fragile) than to testify as well. To say “I am jew,” as I do, while knowing and meaning what one says, is very difficult and vertiginous. One can only attempt to think it after having said it, and therefore, in a certain manner, without yet knowing what one does there, the doing [le faire] preceding the knowing [le savoir] and remaining, more than ever, heterogeneous to it. What must not be done [ce qu’il ne faut pas faire], and that is the core of my limited reproach to the Sartrian logic, is to pretend to know, to dissemble as if one believed one knew what one said, when one does not know. Here, too, I could deploy these words in another language, and I do so elsewhere, but there is not enough time. If, on the one hand, Sartre implicitly, practically, recognizes that this distinction (authentic/inauthentic) is from the first limited in its pertinence, even untenable, what he does not recognize, on the other hand, is from whence came and toward what the ruin of the distinction is going, wherever it is in use, and in the discourse of the age, first in the Heidegger of Being and Time, for whom the question of authenticity was no doubt more originary and more powerful than the question of truth. The ruin of this distinction comes from a bottomless ground [un fond sans fond]. And it has incalculable consequences. Some, and I am not one of them, would say that these are disastrous, devastating consequences: affecting the logic of all these discourses, of course; affecting their existential axiomatics, the ethics and the politics they at least seem to call for, but first, affecting the sense of “being-jew,” the extent, the very pragmatics of any utterance of self-presentation of the type: “I affirm that I am jewish”; or “here I am, I am a Jew of such and such kind”; or “there is no possible misunderstanding, here is why I call myself, why I am called, me, jew.”

What, then, would the undecidable oscillation be, the impossible “either/or” that matters here to me? What is the vaccination that turns the head and produces vertigo, a vertigo one can love or detest, a vertigo through which one can love or hate? It is that the being-jew, the “I am jew, or I am not jew,” of which one can never decide whether it is or is not authentic, one can either take as a case, an example among others of an originary contamination of the authentic by the inauthentic; or, inversely, one can consider that the experience one calls being-jew, whether it be the so-called or alleged Jew or the other, is exemplarily what deconstructs this distinction, squanders the credit granted to it and with it to so many others—in truth, to all conceptual oppositions. Being-jew would then be something more, something other than the simple lever—strategic or methodological—of a general deconstruction; it would be its very experience, its chance, its threat, its destiny, its seism. It would be its hyper-exemplary experience, ultimately, eschatologically, or perversely exemplary, since it would implicate the credit or, if you prefer, the faith that we would place in exemplarity itself. Hyper-exemplary, more than exemplary, other than exemplary, it would threaten, by the same stroke, with all the philosophical and political consequences you may imagine, its alleged exemplarity itself, its universal responsibility incarnated in the singularity of one alone or of one people, and with this, everything that may reassure itself in the sense of the word jew and in the eschatological or messianic (I do not say messianic)—we will no
Abraham, the Other

Jacques Derrida

In saying “here [vouloir-dire]?” sense and meaning in knowing, in signing, and in maintaining a “here I am,” me a Jew, beyond sense and meaning [vouloir-dire]? In saying “here I am,” and insisting, given that I know that perhaps I have not been called, and that perhaps I will never know it is not me who has been called. Not yet. Perhaps in a future to come [avenir], but not yet. It belongs, perhaps, to the experience of appellation and of responsible response that any certainty regarding the destination, and therefore the election, remains suspended, threatened by doubt, precarious, exposed to the future of a decision of which I am not the masterful and solitary—authentic—subject [le sujet maître et solitaire—authentique]. Whoever is certain—as was not, precisely, the other, the second other Abraham of Kafka—whoever believes he detains the certainty of having been, he and he alone, he first, called as the best of the class, transforms and corrupts the terrible and indecisive experience of responsibility and of election into a dogmatic caricature, with the most fearsome consequences that can be imagined in this century, political consequences in particular.

If there is here an experience of undecidability between the authentic, the inauthentic, and the quasi-authentic, well then—once more and as I have tried elsewhere to formulate it in as formalized a manner as possible regarding decision and responsibility in general—this aporetic experience of undecidability or of the impossible, far from being a suspending and paralyzing neutrality, I hold to be the very condition, in truth, the milieu or the ether within which decision, and any responsibility worthy of the name (and perhaps worthy of the name and of the attribute jew) must breathe. At the most acute point, the very limit of this experience, all the problems that have tormented me always, almost always, return in order to insist. Not only is the symmetrical distinction between the “you are jew [or jew­ish]” and the “I am jew [or jew­ish]” no more given or certain than that between the authentic and the inauthentic; but I can also not credit the proposed alternative, the third, about which I will only say one word before concluding. It is the one supposed to separate, around an indivisible border, judaism and Jewishness. Without being able to go deeper here, as one should no doubt, in a proliferation of proposed gaps between judaism, Jewishness, judaicity (Albert Memmi), Judentum, Yiddishkeit, not to speak of Ashkenazi-ness or Sephardic-ness, I will limit myself, given the title of this conference (Judeities) to the one put to work by my friend Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi in his Freud’s Moses, an admirable book that I have discussed, from another perspective, in Archive Fever. The distinction between judaism and Jewishness would illustrate, for example, what Freud,
speaking of his Judaism via negationis, apparently said, either in private, or in his preface to the Hebrew edition of Totem and Taboo. Acknowledging that he did not know the language of the Holy Scriptures, that he was a stranger to the religion of his fathers and to any national or nationalist ideal, Freud then added more or less the following: If one were to ask this Jew (that is, himself), "since you have abandoned all these common characteristics of your compatriots, what is left to you that is Jewish?" he would answer: 'A very great deal, and probably its very essence.' He could not now express that essence in words; but some day, no doubt, it will become accessible to the scientific mind."16 Yerushalmi, too, set his wager on a distinction between Judaism (culture, religion, a historic, even national or "state national" community, etc.) and Jewishness, a Jewish essence independent of Judaism, an essential identity of the being-jew that could interminably survive a Judaism that would, for its part, remain finite and terminable (hence the subtitle of Yerushalmi's book: Judaism Terminable and Interminable). Yerushalmi thus attributes to minimal Jewishness some features about which I have myself asked by what rights they would be reserved in this manner to the Jews (such as, for example, the cult of memory and the openness to hope and to the future [à l'avenir])."17 I imagine the double objection one could address to him from both sides, in order to ruin the very principle of the distinction or at least to limit its relevance, even if one acknowledges it has some such relevance, by pure contextual convenience. Either these minimal features are universal and there is no reason to make them into what is proper to the Jew, save to speculate again on the worrying logic of exemplarity; or, as universal as they are, they will have been announced in a unique and precisely exemplary fashion, by election, in a historical revelation; they would then have to do with writing, with memory or with hope in what one calls Judaism. In the logic of both objections, it is no longer possible to separate, in all rigor, these two poles, namely, Jewishness and Judaism. The memory or the hope that would constitute Jewishness seems to be able to emancipate [affranchir] itself, indeed, from tradition, from the promise and the election proper to Judaism. Yet, whether or not one would have to do so, it will always be possible to re-root the very idea and movement of this emancipation, from the desire for this emancipation, in a given of Judaism, in the memory of an event that, continuing, as it is, to be threatened by amnesia, would remain a history of the gift of the law and would represent the ultimate guardian of the reference to the Jewish phenomenon, to the name or to the attribute "Jew," which one continues to inherit in a Jewishness that is allegedly without Judaism. This inheritance is unerasable, and it endorses even the experience of effacement, of emancipation, of disavowal.

But the oscillation and the undecidability continue, and I would dare say, must continue to mark the obscure and uncertain experience of heritage. In any case, I have been unable to put a stop to this experience in me, and it has conditioned the decisions and the responsibilities that have imprinted themselves upon my life. Moreover, it structures the most formalized, the most resistant, the most irreducible logic of all the discourses I believed I had to endorse (I will not impose this demonstration on you tonight), on the subject of writing and the trace, the relations between law, justice, and right, on the subject of what I have called messianicity without messianism, on the subject of the international beyond cosmopolitanism and beyond state or onto-theological sovereignty, on the subject of democracy to come beyond state-national citizenship, on the subject of spectrality beyond the oppositions life/death or presence/absence, and, most of all, on the subject of khora, as prehistorical place giving (without giving) occasion to any event of anthropo-theological revelation. In all these directions, one could at once and successively accredit two contradictory postulates: on the one hand, it is (from a historical, ethical, political perspective, etc.) the condition that one emancipate oneself from every dogma of revelation and of election; on the other hand, this emancipation can be interpreted as the very content of the revelation or of the election, their very idea. For example, nothing seems more foreign to the God of the Jews and to the history of the law than everything I interpret, even unto its political future to come, under the Greek name of khora, the place, the ahuman and atheological location that opens the place well beyond any negative theology. And yet this manner of interpreting the place can still keep a deep affinity with a certain nomination of the God of the Jews. He is also The Place.

To say that all of this still awaits its interpretation, that this interpretation is not only a hermeneutic or an exegesis, even if such are also necessary, but rather a performative writing and reading, and above all a performative mastery, a hospitality to the event and to the coming occurrence [arrivée] of the coming one [l'arrivant] (a messianicity without messianism), namely, the to-come [à-venir]. The to-come, which is to say, the other, will decide what "Jew," "Judaism," or "Jewishness" will have signified. And although this to-come is not the property of anyone (not the philosophers, the exegetes, the
politicians, the military, etc.), it will necessarily depend, as to come, on an experience of invention that is both prophetic and poetic. The poet-prophets do not always have a name in the Scriptures, and they are not always writers or authors known in the world of religion or in the republic of letters. They can be anyone—and anywhere. They might sometimes be invested, in some situations, with the mission of military generals. There are genius generals, poet-generals, if not prophets, provocative generals, who provoke peace and who sometimes pay for it with their lives. We know one such. On the opposite side of poet-general and just-generals, opposite peace-provoking generals, there are also generals who provoke war. They do, they make others do, or leave for others to do, the worst, without seeing, in their often-shared blindness, that a voluminous appetite for conquistadorlike offensives may dissimulate a death drive and lead, among other crimes, to suicide—theirs and that of their own.

This is why I will always be tempted to think that a Kafka, for example, conjures up more future to come than many others by striking the rock of his fictional writing, and by calling us to this truth (such at least is my interpretation): that anyone responding to the call must continue to doubt, to ask himself whether he has heard right, whether there is no original misunderstanding; whether it was in fact his name that was heard, whether he is the only or the first addressee of the call; whether he is not in the process of substituting himself violently for another; whether the law of substitution, which is also the law of responsibility, does not call for an infinite increase of vigilance and concern. It is possible that I have not been called, me, and it is not even excluded that no one, no One, nobody, ever called any One, any unique one, anybody. The possibility of an original misunderstanding in destination is not an evil, it is the structure, perhaps the very vocation of any call worthy of that name, of all nomination, of all response and responsibility.

There would be perhaps yet another Abraham, not only he who received another name in his old age and, at ninety-nine, at the time of his circumcision, felt, by the blow of a letter, the letter H right in the middle of his name; not only he who, later, on Mount Moriah, was called twice by the angel, first “Abraham, Abraham,” then, a second time still, from the height of the heavens, as Scripture tells us. There would be perhaps not only Abram, then Abraham, Abraham, twice.

That there should be yet another Abraham: here, then, is the most threatened Jewish thought [la pensée juive la plus menacée], but also the