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THE MEMORY OF THE LOST PEOPLE

Shmuel Trigano

The generations born into pre- and post-World War II Jewry experienced two great cataclysms of unequal gravity in nature and extent but with equally serious consequences when gauged by the yardstick of the experience and the continuity of the groups affected. The two groups constituting the Jewish world in fact were shattered by the events of an appalling century. In the Holocaust, the most vibrant centers of the Ashkenazi world were decimated, in an immeasurable catastrophe. With the decolonization, and the subsequent “nationalization” of the Arab world, the Sephardi world lost the very environment in which it existed.

These two arenas of upheaval reveal the link connecting the two ordeals of the Jews of this period: World War II is the linchpin. It is in its aftermath that the decolonization process was triggered in North Africa and the Middle East. The story of Europe, in particular in modern times, is at the heart of this history. With the advent of the European Nation-State, which gave the Jews citizenship only at the individual level, the Jewish people, by reason of its dispersal, lost any practical and legitimate basis of existence.¹ Hannah Arendt, seeking an explanation for antisemitism, considered that the Jews (in this case the Ashkenazim) as a *people* had lost their ambiguous place as mediators in Europe partitioned by the Nation-States, when in 1914 these had entered the era of total war, so that the mass extermination of the Jews was inevitable and only a matter of time.² The fate of the Jews of the southern area of the Mediterranean (in this case the Sephardim) had long been tied to Europe: originally, with the expulsion from Spain; then, subsequently, with the protection that the “capitulations” system of the European powers afforded them against the arbitrariness of the Ottoman regime,³ removing them from the condition of *dhimma*; and, finally, their delivery by the colonial powers from their inferior status of “protected people”, of *dhimmis*.⁴ With decolonization, their destiny was identified with that of the colonizers, sent home by the

colonized, even though the majority of Sephardim had no "home" in Metropolitan France, like the colonial populations. In fact they had been living in these colonial countries often long before their domination by Islam.

The Jewish condition was transformed by this dual trauma. Central and Eastern Europe, one of the oldest centers of Jewish culture, disappeared for ever from the arena of Jewish history. With rare exceptions (pacific as in Morocco, dangerous as in Iran) there are no longer any Jewish communities in the Arab countries.

I. An Unfinished Exile

Since the loss of its original "heimat," how can the Sephardi condition be described today? Can it be said to be characterized by the exile? Concretely, the Sephardim are not yet distanced from their transplantation and dispersal. Psychologically and intellectually, they are floundering in a kind of internal exile. It is in Israel that this lack in themselves and in the world is most strongly felt, because of their messianic expectations of Zion. The Israeli experience was marked by the ordeal of a sudden discrepancy. They expected to arrive in the land promised by the prophets, but were propelled into the historic arena of political Zionism whose ideological plan was to terminate Jewish exile and to derive a "new man" from the old Diaspora Jew. Although very close to the climactic and geographical milieu of their former Mediterranean localities, the cultural Israel that they encountered thus did not really validate their age-old expectations.

In France too, where many already had citizenship, the benefit of the language and cultural familiarity, but which constituted a very different physical milieu, their exile was paradoxical. France no longer embodied a distant ideal model, but was now identified with daily routine. Immersion in a "Metropolitan" world, marked by Christian culture and a centrist political culture, ended the existential arrangement in which they had lived with the coexistence of a mosaic of communities and religions under the majority, but inert, weight of Islam and under the aegis of a sure but distant metropolitan political power. For those who immigrated to the Americas, the rupture was total. So far from the Mediterranean and the East, from their specific human milieu, they were transplanted as it were to another planet, even though, making the most of a bad situation, they were reminded by the American spaces and the natural multiculturalism of these immigration lands, as Naim Kattan once wrote, of the infinite spaces of the desert and the colorful landscapes of the East.

Can the situation described above really be defined as an "exile"? This would imply that the Sephardim had previously "put down roots" in their native regions. Yet, despite several ingrained myths, which see in them (above all for

the North African Jews) descendants of Berber tribes converted to Judaism (although there may well have been some conversions), this was not the reality as regards symbols of identity. The Sephardi consciousness, before the exodus of the 1960s, still clearly remembered multiple previous exiles and origins. Their acculturation to France, from Morocco to Syria via Alexandria, already amounted to a kind of symbolic detachment, very real for those who had received citizenship, in relation to the local milieu, an awkward position, set apart from the native population, yet themselves part of the native population in the eyes of the Europeans. However, this difference, specific to the colonial era, and constituting part of the legal forms, merely intensified a prior break, deriving from the marginalization of these Jewish populations which had lived a kind of "established exile," in the customs and institutions of the Arab-Moslem regimes. The feeling of otherness deriving from this still bore the echo of the greatest trauma experienced by the Sephardi world of the West and the Middle East until the twentieth century: the fifteenth century expulsion from Spain, which gave rise to the dispersal-disappearance of the powerful Judeo-Spanish civilization, which had given them even their name of "Sephardim,"⁵ destined then to be broken up, from the Mediterranean to the Americas via Holland. The memory of Spain, simultaneously extolled and cursed, had always remained with them, even when they had forgotten the language or had retained only a smattering in a Judeo-Arabic whose very real Spanish vocabulary attests to their buried origins. Moreover, the arrival of these Spanish Jews had been a shock for the Jewish populations already settled in North Africa or the Orient, bringing with it new customs and different Judaic norms. When Spain was part of the Moslem empire, there was little difference between the Jews of Spain and those living in its other provinces, since the exchanges allowed by the communications unifying this empire from Cordoba to Baghdad were well developed. The Reconquista of the Spanish lands by the Christian kingdoms naturally promoted a specific history for the Jews, long established there and originally Arab-speaking. Fleeing to the Moslem world, they found themselves naturally differentiated from the local Jews; there were great tensions in the communities between *megorashim* (expelled Jews) and *toshavim* (local inhabitants). Even today such tension still sometimes exists, a rival identity between Judeo-Spanish Sephardim and Judeo-Arab Sephardim, as if the dividing line of Spain between Islam and Christianity had left indelible traces. Notwithstanding, the Arab world itself did not always present a single unified block for the Jews: the Ottoman Empire was added in the sixteenth century to the already deposited strata of the preceding periods, giving new unity to the remains of the shattered Arab empire, and again unifying a large part of the Sephardi world.

As shown by this brief summary of the historic trajectory, even before the turning point of the 1950s and 1960s, Sephardi consciousness already had the memory of numerous exiles. Colonial France, by its assimilating power, had merely summed up, for most of them, who were within its sphere of influence,

all their foreign experiences. In reality, they had already "departed," over a century before packing their suitcases and this departure was merely superimposed on their structural marginality in the Arab world.

Forty years after the disappearance of its places of residence, Sephardi consciousness is today experiencing a pivotal moment. It is now faced with the question of memory and continuity, after having invested itself emotionally, to the point of forgetting itself, in the effort of relocation and survival, following the great upheaval that terminated its centuries-old settlement. Indeed, the last generation acquainted with the countries of origin is now reaching maturity and is faced with the question of transmission. It is tackling the second side of its life and perceives more acutely the role of link that it must play, if the world in which it was born deserves to survive, to continue, in any case to be remembered. Is what made it what it is, in the experience of the senses and the soul, fated to disappear for ever in the memory of the young generations born in the land of exile? What is "transmissible" in this experience? Is the heritage of the Sephardi world doomed to disappear completely? We may be led to think so when we see the current erosion of its classical culture, the fragility of its transmission channels, not to say the lack of self-awareness that characterizes it. Is a human universe in the process of complete dissolution?

Sephardi memory seems to be suspended. It might even be sick as shown by the strange return to religion characterizing certain of its milieus: seeking to return to their origins, they find no better way than a traumatic deculturation. In any case, today this memory is blocked. It is as if the work of memory has not been carried out, as if it was still stumbling against insurmountable obstacles. The past must be mourned before it can be transmitted and before memory can do its work. It is as if an age-old history had not been brought to an end, as if the symbolical and practical break had not been made between this not so remote past and the present.

It might be considered a proof of vitality and health not to consider the end of a very long cycle of consciousness and history. Yet, only on the basis of this affirmation of extinction (not of death) can life continue. It is only by acknowledging the reality that Sephardi consciousness will be able to take stock of what it was, what it is and what it could be in the future, if it is to have a future. This is the problem today. Sephardi consciousness is at an impasse.

II. The Obstacles to Memory

What might disrupt the work of Sephardi memory, in the experience of the transitional generations that we are, living a transition between two states of reality, one dead, and the other still in limbo? We postulate that the entire experience of the century is summed up in its specific difficulties, so point that we cannot understand them without reflection on the entire history of

contemporary Judaism. Five propositions can help us to define them. Reflection on these will clarify and serve as a foundation.

1. The Shadow of the Holocaust

The tragedy of the Ashkenazi world was infinitely more serious than the Sephardi drama. Apart from the Balkans where an age-old life was completely eradicated by the Nazis, the Sephardim escaped extermination in extremis in the Middle East and in North Africa. In light of this fact and of the empathy that they felt for their brethren when the uprooting projected them among them, they spontaneously suppressed the clear consciousness of their own trauma or addressed it in the perspective of the Holocaust. It was perhaps also a way of redefining their tie to the West when they emerged from the cataclysm that had struck them. They spontaneously showed their awareness of the existence of the Jewish people, but this precluded the work of mourning their own suffering. Yet, at the same time this empathy was unthinkable, if not to say sacrilege, for many Ashkenazi milieus, which had found in the memory of the Holocaust an identity emblem specific to their ethnic group, a sign of belonging to the "Jewish people," from which logically the Sephardim could only be excluded; the legitimacy of the Sephardi experience and memory was blunted because they had not suffered the Holocaust.

2. The Refocusing of Identity on Judaism

The ambiguous status of the Sephardim in the century that preceded the great uprooting certainly plays a role in the difficulty of forming the memory. They were both "native," close to the colonized Moslem society, and distant from it, "Europeans," close to the colonizer or the foreigner, an interface between two worlds (very distant worlds, those of the colonized and the colonizer), in the space of which they had formed a new soul—and a certain power (of mediation)—, so that any self-perception that they might have had was dulled (unless it attained a liberty which was unaware of itself). The identity scale in which they played their score was in fact very broad, combining multiple allegiances at the same time, and this freed them from self-definition, in principle restrictive. Yet, with the departure, they found themselves *Pieds-Noirs* (Algerian-born Frenchmen) among the *Pieds-Noirs*, displaced persons in Metropolitan France, immigrants among the Israelis, foreigners among the North Americans, Sephardim among the Ashkenazim. The circumstances imposed upon them an alignment of identity which no longer allowed half-tones, an evolution which helped to intensify the loss of sense of direction and the confusion of identity.

The most marked phenomenon in this sense seems to have been the very term "Sephardi," until then completely forgotten and of which generally they

were completely unaware until it came back to them overwhelmingly as a result of their meeting with other Jews, the Ashkenazim. They thought of themselves solely as Jews, and now they found themselves in a restricted and limiting framework of "Sephardim" within a Jewish people that was larger than they were. It was as if their identity then came from outside. They thus had to return to this dimension which now became central; what was happening in the Jewish people now became for them decisive because of the new exile which affected them and in which they found themselves—in a new environment—first and foremost Jews. Until then, in their experience, Judaism naturally "spoke Sephardi;" now they found themselves a minority, and a small minority (about 2 million out of 14 million Jews). Judaism, so evident for them that it was "part of the furniture," now became a problem for understanding of their own personality in which the Sephardi element became a secondary dimension, while before it had been the absolute dimension.

Their ambivalent situation in the composite and multicultural colonial societies of North Africa and the Middle East had conserved for Judaism a status that it had lost in the Ashkenazi world in general. A part of everyday life, it had not become an ideology and had not split up into several rival and mutually hostile "synagogues." Propelled into this Judaism by the force of circumstances, the Sephardim now had to choose their affiliation. But which affiliation? Sephardi traditionalism constitutes the only synagogue current which has no name (and which is not organized as such), except for this name of "traditionalist" attached to it automatically, for lack of criteria of evaluation and classification.

The fact that large parts of the Sephardi world, in any case of all its religious leadership, joined the ultra-Orthodox and the Lubavitch movements, both typically East European, attests to the fact that frequently those who have not found their place in the dominating system join a category outside the system. The phenomenon of the "Shas" Party ("Sephardic Association of Torah Keepers") is significant in this evolution. Paragon of Sephardism, it extracts the essence from the ethnic origin and religion, index-linking them with a new political dimension. In Israeli society, marked by the ethos of Zionism, there was only the ultra-Orthodox sector—which had rejected Zionism and the values of Israeli society—to embody an alternative if only at a "mechanical" level. This can help to explain, among other causes, the strange phenomenon of Shas, which certainly expresses an activist assuming of the Sephardi community by itself, but in the name of an ethos extremely foreign to it and which in no way resembles the claimed model of authenticity. The memory, in this case, is asserted there aggressively, but it conveys the doctored memory of a lost world, living the Sephardi memory through another memory, that of Ashkenazi ultra-orthodoxy. In this case, Judaism has once more become the strongest axis of Sephardi identification, but to the detriment of their specific memory and above all of their doctrine and religious conduct. The entire paradox lies in the fact

that this neo-Judaism, considered ultra-Sephardi, has become a vehicle for oblivion.

3. The postcolonial feeling of guilt

The colonial experience had other consequences for the condition of the Sephardim, this time outside themselves, in the way in which their human environment considered them at the time of their uprooting. The third-world ideology, whose influence on Western opinion was to become dominant, led to their automatic assimilation with colonialism. They "went back" to Europe (from which they had never departed!) in the colonist's carriages. Had they themselves not chosen their camp? Objectively, the independence of the colonial countries had indeed sounded the death knell of the Jewish presence in the former colonies.

The guilty conscience attached henceforth to colonialism reflected on them. Yet the Sephardim have a grievance inherited from their lower status in the Islamic polity. Over a million, in the great majority of cases, had to flee certain death, abandoning all their possessions, in the period between 1950 and 1970. For the work of the Sephardi memory to be carried out, this debit (product of the plundering and ethnic purification undertaken and continued to this day by the Arab nation-states) must be strongly reminded. Yet, both the third-world left and the Jewish left have made this impossible. According to their viewpoint, the world of the colonized Arabs in principle could not be colonialist or intolerant or racist. By suppressing this trauma, we understand nothing of Sephardi history and of the base of its consciousness. Very frequently the Sephardim themselves brought about this falsification of history. It allowed them to conform to what was politically correct and to recover legitimacy when they were assimilated with execrated colonialism. The exclusive solicitude of the Israeli left for the Palestinians and its insensitivity to social injustice in its own country stifled consideration of their own despoiling and exclusion by almost the entire Arab world. Having become improvised eulogists of an imagined Judeo-Arab idyll, they had quite simply forgotten that if they had good memories of the Arab world, it was because the colonial power that had liberated them stood between them and the Arabs. This myth of Judeo-Moslem symbiosis was a complete fabrication. The Judeo-Spanish golden age, the illusory Al-Andalus, is the work of the Jews only, in a society where they were persecuted *dhimmis* (as demonstrated by the pogroms suffered: Fostat in 1011, Fez in 1033, Granada in 1066, the Yemen in 1165 or the persecution of the Almohads (1130-1212) who destroyed all the North African communities and converted the Jewish masses by force). The ascertaining of its veracity is trivial: we merely have to ask why (except in Morocco, but in a minor way) all the Sephardi communities have disappeared from the Arab world? As soon as the Arab world recovered its freedom, it became more or less clear that the Jews were fated to become

dhimmi again: those who were not expelled, hunted down, progressively excluded, fled to escape a totalitarian society.

The most pathetic aspect in the new mythology, which so contradicts the testimony of Sephardi historical chronicles, was to see the development of a claim of "Arab Jewish" identity, assuming an ideological concept belonging to Arab nationalism (the myth of Arabness and the unified Arab nation, transcending countries), all in all of being more Arab than the Arabs. This obscured the profound significance of their mass choice of Zionism, which objectively is equivalent to a form of political self-determination in the very midst of the Arab world (the Middle East) by an oppressed Jewish national minority. To recognize this would have reduced to naught the leftist legend of the "original sin" of Israel and the idea of its creation as compensation for the Holocaust. The majority that they constitute in Israel are not Holocaust survivors. Thus the Sephardi suffering was stifled under the third-world feeling of guilt of the West: deserved suffering, denigrated, forbidden memory.

4. "The New Man" and the Remains of the "Old Man"

The messianic consciousness with which the Sephardi Jews had left their regions proved misleading in two ways. It had weakened the acknowledgment of their exclusion from the Arab world and had raised in them false expectations as regards Israel. The country in which they arrived was then swept along by the enterprise of "normalization" of the Jewish people in search of the "new man." Following the example of the nineteenth century revolutions, both nationalist and socialist (and above all the French Revolution), political Zionism wished to produce a new type of man, who, in this case, would have broken away from the condition of the exile, considered degrading, and above all from Judaism, blamed for the historic defeatism and degradation of the Jewish people. In this way it continued the project of "regeneration" of the Jews undertaken by the emancipators, and from which the Sephardi Jews had escaped, having lived modernization outside the colonial mainland.

Judaism had remained for them a living and present dimension of identity, a symbol of the continuity of a collective existence in the history of the nations. The Israeli experience presupposed that they give it up. The difference between their messianic faith and their reception by official Israel was immeasurable. From it they conceived the feeling of having been betrayed, deceived, abandoned by their brethren at the very time when they were in the throes of their internal turmoil. This feeling certainly still plays a large part in their difficulty in carrying out the work of memory.

The resentment towards the injustice suffered has in fact sent the wounded consciousness back to its structural unease and has forced it to reassume this consciousness instead of conceiving a critical distance. This is what has prevented retroactively a clear analysis of the reality experienced in the present.

Nonetheless, there are more opportunities to carry it out today with the process of liberalization in Israel, in the wake of many other countries. Sephardi consciousness might also be unblocked, although we must not be too premature in this respect, to judge by the latest iconoclastic developments of the "post-Zionist" consciousness that we can observe in the ideological current of the "new sociologists" with whose doctrines many Sephardi intellectuals identify. In their denial of the Israeli nation and the Jewish identity of Israel, the Sephardi question has assumed a new strategic importance. The Sephardim play the role of "local" victim of Zionism: through stigmatizing of the way in which Zionism treated them, they are used as a rhetorical expedient against the State of Israel. The only problem for the credibility of such an ideological maneuver lies in the parties concerned, whose identification with Zionism and with the Jewish people seems not to weaken, despite the disappointments experienced.

5. The Specter of the Lost People

In light of all the perspectives considered above, the causes of the difficulties experienced by Sephardi memory should be sought well beyond the Sephardi world. This "inhibited" memory is absolutely part of the causalities specific to Jewish memory in general and thus to Ashkenazi memory. The condition of the Jewish people in political modernity is at the root of this unforeseen difficulty. Were not the reality and the very idea of a Jewish people awoken and revived by the contemporary meeting between Ashkenazim and Sephardim? It is the first time in history that Sephardi and Ashkenazi Jews have met in such a significant way and in such large numbers. Yet, it is precisely this meeting that calls the Jewish people to reappraise itself, showing its failures and impasses.

This people did not come out of modernity unscathed. It had in fact "disappeared" in the Emancipation; or rather it had been fated to break up as a people, the Jews having acceded to citizenship only at the individual level, not as part of a historical Jewish people, therefore not as part of a political unit. Without Zionism, the "self-emancipatory" choice, the Jewish people was in fact destined to die out with the European "Emancipation:" it had neither place nor legitimacy in the individual citizen condition. It is the Holocaust which again gave prominence to the lost Jewish people; there the Jews were exterminated as a people, whose members were cut out, one by one and en masse, from all the nations of Europe.

It was in this people that the Sephardim suddenly appeared, a totally unforeseen and unexpected appearance. However, they embodied a third modality of the Jewish "people," not totally victim of the Holocaust, not totally transformed by the emancipation, and not creator of a Zionism with the vocation of compensating for the failures of the emancipation. The dimension of people in political history had in fact only just been saved there, *inter alia*

because their condition of dominated was collective in the countries where the nation-state did not exist.

When they joined the Ashkenazim, the Sephardim restored an existential reality to the dimension of "Jewish people" which had become obsolete, suppressed, delegitimized, but, in doing so, their arrival created a hiatus in this people, a kind of difference in level: two historical logics, two temporal levels mixed together. The "Israeli" people was then being constituted as a nation under the government of a State. It was moving away from its condition of "Jewish people" by reason of its "normalization."

What the Sephardim experienced in political Zionism is the fact that the Jewish people was problematic within the Israeli nation, which had arisen in its stead. In this respect it is interesting to note that the Israeli discourse spontaneously qualified the "people" within them as "Oriental ethnic groups (Edot ha Mizrah) while no concept of this type, no notion of "Western ethnic groups" exists for the Ashkenazi Jews who are considered to be naturally within the "nation."

With the Sephardim (and in this light, their Messianism takes on a new significance), it is as if the historic people reemerged in the normal nation. Two levels of historic evolution were mixed together here. The meeting of the Sephardim with the Jews originating in the European historic process could only cause deep unease among the latter. It awoke in them their own buried memory of the historic people, the memory that they had tried to forget and to suppress in light of modern necessity but which was reimposed upon them by the non-Jewish world. It is in the extermination camps that the Jews, beyond their differences and their citizen status, had recovered their condition of people in the political historical realm, for a tragic fate. Thus the Sephardim found themselves neglected and rejected. They were too much like the "old Jews" that the "new Jews" had tried to suppress in themselves. Unconsciously, their fate bore the fate of the historic Jewish people which had been rendered obsolete by modernity, right within modern Israel.

By their unexpected emergence on the scene of European Jewish history, the Sephardim revived the memory of the "people." They showed, even in this confusion and obfuscation, its indomitable continuity. By their very existence, they challenged the modern consensus that the Jews had survived only "by default," in their own negativity, as a "humanitarian" cause, i.e. infra-historic and infra-political attracting the "humanitarian" restitution of an identity defined as exclusively of victims... The meeting of the two groups that make up the Jewish people thus obliged the Jews to face their destiny of historic people in modernity and to pave the way to go beyond modernity.

The memory of the lost people aroused by the Sephardi memory is thus the memory of the Jewish people waiting to be dealt with in political modernity. The latter memory cannot be formed without releasing the former. It is this

weight that it must assume but which constitutes its main handicap today and which allows us to understand how the shadow of the Holocaust weighed on it so crushingly. It must be acknowledged that the Sephardi elite are totally absent in respect of this mission. They are risking here the future of the identity that they bear. All the current controversial debates opposing Ashkenazim and Sephardim (particularly in Israel) merely suppress and overlook the necessity of this confrontation with the Jewish memory of a modernity in which the Jews had to disappear as a people, and in which part of the people actually disappeared, tragically. The Sephardim's return to the Ashkenazim is the Ashkenazim's return to the historical destiny of the Jewish people, now sovereign in its land. The shift in historic time that the return of the Sephardim to the global Jewish arena caused in the Jewish world could be an exceptional opportunity for its continuity and rebirth.

Notes

- 1 Cf. Shmuel Trigano, *L'idéal démocratique à l'épreuve de la Shoa* (Odile Jacob, 1999).
- 2 Cf. Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Part I "Antisemitism" (1951).
- 3 This refers to the "capitulation" system which permitted to European foreigners in Moslem lands to escape the *dhimmi* condition. Jews from Europe or natives who had economic means were buying this protection from European consulates for the same purpose.
- 4 The non-Moslem natives subject to Islam were governed by the status of *dhimmis* (protected people). This status is also known under the name of "Pact of Omar". After the Islamic conquest, the right was recognized for the non-Moslems to administer themselves according to their religious laws, to reside, to circulate (with certain restrictions and taxes to pay). The *dhimmi* had to pay a capitation tax, the *djizya*, during a ritual in which he was humiliated. The *dhimma* was in fact also a "system of degradation" to quote Jules Isaac, in *Genèse de l'antisémitisme*, to define the Jewish condition in Christendom after the fifth century Theodosian Code. It was characterized by a set of persecutory and discriminatory measures (of clothing—special clothing and distinctive signs; of rules of behavior—not to ride on horseback, to give right of way to the Moslem).
- 5 The term "Sephardi" (like the term "Ashkenazi") is biblical: we find in Obadiah 20 "the captivity of Jerusalem, that is in Sepharad." In Jewish tradition, Sepharad came to designate Spain and Ashkenaz Germany. These two terms are the Judaic identification of the two sections that make up the Jewish world.

Shmuel Trigano is a professor at the University of Paris-Nanterre. He is the founding director of the College of Jewish Studies at the Alliance Israélite Universelle and the holder of the Elia Benamozegh European Chair of Sephardic Studies (Livorno, Italia). He is also the founding director of two journals, *Pardès* (Jewish studies and culture) and *Controverses* (political ideas). He is president of the *Observatoire du monde juif* (analysis of contemporary antisemitism). Professor Trigano has published numerous works: sixteen books in the fields of philosophy, political thought, and Jewish studies. He just edited a two volume book on the history and civilization of the Sephardic world, *Le monde sépharade* (Seuil, 2006).
