



# Isaac Abravanel: Between Ethnic Memory and National Memory

Jean-Christophe Attias

In its metamorphoses, the discourse devoted to the dead is always first of all the consecration of the living.” In the Jewish world, Isaac Abravanel (1437–1508), one of the celebrated dead if ever there was one, offers a striking illustration of this general principle articulated by the historian Jean-Claude Bonnet.<sup>1</sup> The historical figure of Abravanel certainly lent itself to a great investment of memory. His biographical and intellectual trajectory provides an excellent avenue for the reelaboration of the collective, as well as the individual memory and imaginary. As a participant in, a victim of, and finally, an interpreter of an event that was a turning point—the Jews’ expulsion from Spain in 1492—Abravanel appears as a key figure. He is situated at the point of contact between Christianity (he served its kings and combated its theology) and Islam (he was on the Christian side in the struggle against Granada, sent his son Samuel to study in Salonika, and himself considered settling in Turkish territory). He belonged to many Mediterraneans: he was an Iberian, an Italian, and (prospectively) an Ottoman. Although he reached the height of power then accessible to a Jew, he could not alter the course of his people’s history by having the expulsion decree rescinded; nevertheless, he recovered from each of his falls. A faithful Jew (he preferred expulsion to apostasy), he was himself the grandson of an apostate. His personal destiny incarnated that of an entire community and continued that of his family. Finally, he became the man of memory, assuming and overcoming the historical break and, in his messianic writings, forcefully reasserting the expectations of hope.<sup>2</sup>

Everything was in place, then, for the story to be transformed into legend and for a halo to form around the hero, a halo that, even as it hid him from the gaze of others, assured him everlasting influence.

Many memories were to seize hold of Abravanel. There is, for example, the French Catholic and Protestant memory of the man, which crystallized at the end of the seventeenth and the beginning of the eighteenth centuries, and whose influence was still very strong in the middle of the nineteenth century. In that case, Abravanel figured as the Jew par excellence, displaying the vices or virtues that, according to the circumstances, people chose to attribute to Jews.<sup>3</sup> There is also the memory, paradoxically dependent on the first, that nineteenth-century Franco-Judaism forged in turn, transforming the court Jew into a “state Jew,” that is, into an excellent *israélite*, a sincere patriot, and an enlightened mind.<sup>4</sup> Yet I would first like to evoke a different memory, an Eastern and Jewish memory, more directly heir to the cultural reference points of Abravanel and his contemporaries, a memory of rootedness and identification, the egotistical memory of ethnicity.

### The Totem

I first encountered Abravanel at the theater. It was in Jerusalem in about 1914. A play was being performed whose title was, precisely, “Don Isaac Abravanel.” The scene of the exile, with this figure leading the way [*en tête*], was gripping, poignant. Although that was more than twenty years ago, it remains fresh in my mind. I no longer remember the name of the artist who incarnated Abravanel, but I can still see his fine build, his Hebrew profile, his blazing eyes. His entire being exuded a fluid magnetism that dominated and carried away the wavering herd of poor exiles. Add to that a powerful voice that drew its force from an immense faith and that seemed to be addressing God. Since then, no reading, no study has been able to replace that image. Neither the state minister and his pomp, nor the philosopher, nor the exegete, have ever held my attention.<sup>5</sup>

We could not conceive of a description more distant from the austere shores of historical criticism. The editor of *Le Judaïsme Séphardi*, Ovadia Camhy, born in 1888, had truly encountered Abravanel; that encounter owed nothing to books, to the learning of scholars or philosophers; and as he remembered it, Abravanel was a person with a face, a voice, a veritable *presence*. For the mind remembering him, that immediate, “gripping, poignant,” ever “fresh” presence eliminated all distance of time and space: “I can still see [him].” Abravanel was present in a twofold and absolute sense: in the flesh of a character “incarnated” by the actor and, even more compelling in the spectator’s memory, as a genuine contemporary literally “re-presented” by the magic of the theater.

The magic of the theater, however, does not explain everything. The actor (whose name Camhy does not remember) only lent his body and talent to a myth that preexisted him.<sup>6</sup> In the Sephardic imaginary, Isaac Abravanel was not only “the last of the galaxy of stars shining in the Spanish sky for more than five hundred years.”<sup>7</sup> He was, at the same time, the last of the Spaniards, the first of the exiles, and the ever present. He was the hero, the forebear, the totem. To use Camhy’s expression (giving it a double meaning he may not have intended), Abravanel was indeed *en tête* of the exiles: the one guiding them, in the lead, but also the one they did not forget. Although the name of Abravanel evokes a lost splendor, his greatness and his choices justified all at the same time exile, pride, and hope. As early as in seventeenth-century Amsterdam, Manasseh ben Israel counted Abravanel and his family among the reasons for his expectations that “God reserves us for better things”: “For in this captivity and among the many reproaches which we Jews suffer, yet many of ours are honorably entertained by princes with a singular affection.” The prestigious career of Abravanel and of his descendants bore witness to this.<sup>8</sup>

It is therefore not surprising that *Le Judaïsme Séphardi*, the official organ of the Confédération Universelle des Juifs Sépharadim (World Confederation of Sephardic Jews), devoted a complete issue to Abravanel in 1937, the five hundredth anniversary of his birth;<sup>9</sup> or that Abravanel has been recurrently glorified in the Sephardic ethnic/communal press up to the present, whether in conjunction with particular celebrations or not.<sup>10</sup> We can even understand why, by the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, Abravanel had become “one of the most productive subjects in the Eastern Sephardic theater.”<sup>11</sup> He provided an “autochthonous” subject matter that the public could easily assimilate in a literature of novels and plays that was overly dependent on translations.<sup>12</sup> Several plays by different authors were performed by troupes of local Jewish actors in Bulgaria (in Vidin, Ruse, and Shumla), in Greece and Turkey (Salonika, Smyrna, and Istanbul), and in the Holy Land (as Camhy himself recalls).<sup>13</sup> These plays were ordinarily written and presented in Judeo-Spanish, the vernacular for Sephardic communities in the East and in the Balkans; there were also some adaptations in Hebrew.<sup>14</sup> One appears to have been originally written in French and published in that language in Pera (the European sector of Istanbul): *Don Isaac: Drame historique en 5 actes sur l'Exode des Juifs d'Espagne* (Don Isaac: Historical Drama in Five Acts on the Exodus of the Jews from Spain). This text, written by the highly colorful Santo Semo and performed in Judeo-Spanish in 1908 in Istanbul, was even submitted to the Théâtre-Français in Paris in 1937, though without success.<sup>15</sup> From that abundant, polymor-

phic, but largely redundant literature, a dense and highly structured image of Abravanel emerges.

[140]        Nothing better accounts for Abravanel's truly totemic role than the ways his name has been etymologically manipulated. For scholars, "Abravanel" may be merely a derived form of "Abraham"—which in itself would suffice to grant the man a special stature (the biblical Abraham was the forebear of the Jewish people and, to quote Genesis 17:5, "a father of many nations"). Neither the family tradition nor the popular tradition, however, has retained that possibility. Isaac's son, Juda Abravanel (ca. 1460 - ca. 1523), suggests two interpretations: *Ever ben El*, "a limb of a son of God," and *Bar ben El*, "a son of a son of God."<sup>16</sup> As for the popular tradition, it maintains that "Abravanel" was originally not a name but a *title*, given to the exiled descendants of the house of David after the destruction of the Temple, and that the word ought to be decomposed as follows: *Av-Raban-El*, "Padre-Senior-Dio," to be understood as *representante del Dio* (representative of God).<sup>17</sup>

As father, master, quasi-divine forebear, Abravanel consolidates and justifies aristocratic Sephardic pretensions. His patronym, as we have seen, is not a name but a title. It was therefore quite natural that this descendant of the royal house of David, this "Prince of Israel," would also be honored with the title *Don*.<sup>18</sup> The aristocrat has his coat of arms.<sup>19</sup> Everyone knows that throughout history the Abravanel held titles as brilliant as they were varied: "king of the Jews," *nasi* (prince), *gaon* (lord), "chief rabbi." It is thus no surprise that according to anecdotal history, Isabella, queen of Castile, conceived some secret penchant for the "handsome" Jewish Portuguese ambassador.<sup>20</sup> It was all a royal affair. And, in the same way, it is easy to imagine a romantic interlude between Isaac's daughter and the nephew of Ferdinand of Aragon. Although they didn't belong to the same people or the same religion, were they not of the same rank?<sup>21</sup>

In fact, Isaac Abravanel was only one link in a long genealogical chain, a line, a family with a "tutelary," even "providential," role for Israel, one in a prestigious series of great Jews and great men of state.<sup>22</sup> It was an Abravanel that the Abbasid caliph Harun ar-Rashid supposedly sent on an embassy to Charlemagne, who was said to have acknowledged him as the descendant of David and to have entrusted him with the territories of Narbonne and Arles, giving him the title *Rex Judaeorum*.<sup>23</sup> And by a remarkable and wondrous historical reversal, what Isaac failed to do (annul the expulsion decree of 1492), his descendants accomplished. It was Samuel Abravanel (1473–1547), son of Isaac, who in 1533 successfully brought about the suspension (although temporary) of an expulsion edict issued from the viceroy of Naples, the Spaniard Pedro de

Toledo.<sup>24</sup> And it was also one David [Dormido] Abravanel, rather than Manasseh ben Israel, who was supposedly the “true promoter” of the actions leading to the official opening of England to the Jews of Holland. The reversal, the redemption, the *tikun* (reparation) one might say, was complete: here was a negotiation not to abrogate an expulsion, but rather to gain entry. As a result, Jews could only rejoice at “the spectacle of those two Abravanel, one destined to preside over the end of an epoch in our history as Sephardim, the other to inaugurate the advent of a new era, no less glorious in scope than the first, whose effects and results are far from being exhausted.”<sup>25</sup>

To be a member of such a line is no small thing. A saying in the vernacular of the descendants of the exiles of 1492 ironically attests to this: “Basta mi nombre sea de Abravanel” (It is enough [for me to deserve respect] that my name is Abravanel).<sup>26</sup> This is said to ridicule someone who, without having any special qualities, wishes to derive glory from the prestige of his family or simply of a great name; such an expression indirectly betrays the place that the Abravanel have come to occupy within Sephardic popular memory.

This sense of lineage and of family has continued in a remarkable way to the end of the twentieth century. Paying tribute to an altogether recent trend and at the same time linking themselves to a typically Jewish concern for *yihus* (lineage),<sup>27</sup> the Abravanel throughout the world—like the Carassos in France and the Shapruts or the Meyuhas in Israel—have demonstrated a renewed attachment to their name and their line. In the United States, Allan R. Abravanel founded *The Abravanel Family Newsletter*, in which we learn, among other things, that an Abravanel almost became president of Brazil and that Max Nordau (1849–1923), the Zionist leader, was a descendant of the famous Isaac.<sup>28</sup> On 21 March 1992, 130 Abravanel from every corner of the earth, celebrating in their manner the five hundredth anniversary of the Jews’ expulsion from Spain, held a family reunion in New York, which gave the American orchestra leader Maurice Abravanel the opportunity to declare: “We cannot be humble with a name like that. That’s impossible. The best we can do is try to live in a way that the grand old man would be proud of us.”<sup>29</sup> In fact, the representatives of the family felt they were entrusted with a true “mission.”<sup>30</sup>

That aristocratic, genealogical, and totemic dimension constitutes only one of the aspects—the vertical aspect—of the Abravanel myth. The myth has also been constructed horizontally, by placing the hero in relation to other equally emblematic individuals. First, there is the pairing of Abravanel and Abraham Seneor (ca. 1412 - ca. 1493). Seneor, the *Rab de la Corte*, ceded to pressure and converted to Christianity; it

[141]

Jean-  
Christophe  
Attias



Isaac  
Abravanel

is true that “he [was] very old”<sup>31</sup> and that a rumor was circulating that the queen had resolved to destroy the entire Jewish community if he did not apostatize.<sup>32</sup> It is nonetheless true that, in contrast to him, Abravanel incarnated a force of character and a sense of honor and faithfulness that many Marranos would have envied.<sup>33</sup>

The second essential pair, perfectly antithetical this time, is Abravanel and Tomás de Torquemada (ca. 1420–98). As “the monster of wickedness” in the Sephardic imaginary, the grand inquisitor pulled all the strings in the intrigue, manipulated the rulers without difficulty, and circumvented his adversaries.<sup>34</sup> Abravanel was his only “formidable enemy.” And the fate of Spanish Jewry was played out in a final theatrical confrontation. Brandishing a crucifix, Tomás succeeded in making Ferdinand (who had been too sensitive to Abravanel’s financial propositions and arguments) capitulate: “Sire, Judas Iscariot sold the Lord for thirty pieces of silver. Will you sell him again for thirty thousand ducats? Will you? Well then, here he is! Sell him!”<sup>35</sup>

The third and last horizontal axis around which the myth has been structured concerns the pair Abravanel and Christopher Columbus (ca. 1451–1506). The navigator’s presumed Jewishness, as we know, has triggered a great deal of speculation. In his “historical drama,” Santo Semo does not postulate it, of course, but Columbus is very present throughout the play as the “Genoese with the tattered coat,” who had sired a child by “the Jewess Beatriz Enriques.” His undertaking is protected by a new Christian and financed by Abravanel and the Jewish community. His plan is examined by the royal council at the same time as the expulsion edict. And, as Abravanel declaims at the very end of the play:

We both leave . . . the same day! I, banished, burdened with my own miseries and those of my people, assaulted by the curses and hatred of all, having nothing to expect but the stranger’s pity, walking toward the blackest, the most frightening future. . . . You, full of faith in yourself, full of hope, headed toward glory, accompanied by the wishes of all. . . . And the same pen authorized both departures. . . . God willing, Columbus, and you discover some new land, let it be hospitable to Israel, and may our sons one day live there as free men and prosper, enjoying respect for their beliefs and their rights.<sup>36</sup>

The encounter between the two men opens onto the future, with one fleeing toward the East, the other leaving for the West, Columbus holding out from one direction what the Turk offers from the other.

Man of exile, flight, and ruin, Abravanel, who sees Columbus as his positive (conquering and glorious) double, also incarnates the

ineradicable hope of the exiles and their descendants. More than anyone else, he is the quintessence of exile, for even after his death, he has no right to repose, and the hazards of war erase every trace of his sepulcher: "Thus the tomb of one of the most noble sons of Israel has remained unknown until our own time."<sup>37</sup> The significance and scope of that loss goes beyond exile, however: this lack of a sepulcher confers on Abravanel the final mark of the "Hebrew profile," the "biblical greatness" evoked by Camby.<sup>38</sup> Abravanel is no less than a new Moses, the Jewish hero par excellence, the Moses of whom it is written, "no man knoweth of his sepulcher unto this day" (Deuteronomy 34:6). Like Moses, Abravanel never trod the ground of the Promised Land, but announced deliverance and ceaselessly demonstrated its proximity. There is almost something of the messiah in Abravanel. When someone asks the character Abravanel where he plans to go with the exiles, Santo Semo has him reply: "Where God will! Toward the land of my forefathers! (Extending his hand toward the East). Toward Zion!"<sup>39</sup> These are the last words of the drama: they complete the integration of Abravanel, descendant of David and carrier of Jewish hope, into the continuity of the messianic history of Israel.

That ethnic and totemic memory of Abravanel provides a remarkable focal point for an identity that is indissolubly Jewish in the most general sense of the word and Sephardic in the most specific sense. We could no doubt retrace the history of that memory's formation and identify its sources, but we need only signal here that such a memory puts everything to use. It can embrace the most recent contemporary efforts at remembrance and the search for ancestors (through anniversaries and genealogical research). Feeding, by definition, on "recollections that are hazy, overlapping, all-inclusive or wavering, individual or symbolic, susceptible to every kind of transference, filter, censorship, and projection," memory has no difficulty appropriating all the "scientific" knowledge of the most modern—even the most critical—historical scholarship, selecting, reconstructing, reformulating, and pouring into a single coherent mold a whole set of disparate data.<sup>40</sup> In this essay, I have tried merely to restore the form the myth took at the turn of the twentieth century, while at the same time throwing some light on more recent periods. For there is truly a Sephardic, even Sephardist, myth of Abravanel. Abravanel serves to express both Sephardic being and the Sephardic form of Jewish being. The greater the venerated ancestor, the greater those who venerate him: for in venerating Abravanel, the Sephardim are quite simply venerating themselves.<sup>41</sup>

## The Jew of the Exile

[144] Jewish Social Studies Could this memory, which is fundamentally *ethnic* (culturally marked, Sephardic, Eastern) and *exilic* (even though, or because, it is messianic), be carried forward in the reelaborations of Zionist (and for the most part Ashkenazic) historiography? The memory transmitted by the tribe is always a long way from the reconstructed memory of the nation. In fact, events as well as ideology have led inexorably to a revision of the representations of the Exile, a revision from which Abravanel has not emerged unscathed.

In 1937, the five hundredth anniversary of Abravanel's birth occasioned the expression of various memories of the man: the French *Israélite* opusculé by Henri Soil, the series of articles in *Le Judaïsme Séphardi*, and several scholarly studies published in Germany, Great Britain, Palestine, and the United States.<sup>42</sup> All this work was carried out in the shadow of dramatic developments: the rise of the perils in Germany and in Europe, more broadly. In Berlin itself, the Jewish community organized an exhibition on Abravanel, which was destroyed by the Nazis; Soil compared the situation of his German coreligionists to the fate of Spanish Jews in the fifteenth century; Santo Semo explained that his play was rejected by the Théâtre-Français out of fear of the wave of antisemitism then spreading over France; and after the blow of *Kristallnacht* on 9 November 1938, A. H. Navon explained he was giving up his series of studies on the Abravanel family because of the gravity of the circumstances.<sup>43</sup>

One cannot overemphasize how much memory owes to the present. The year 1992—the five hundredth anniversary of the expulsion of the Jews from Spain—was, paradoxically, the occasion to celebrate a certain more or less imaginary Judeo-Spanish and Judeo-Turkish symbiosis. The Europe being constructed no doubt led to this display of ebullient optimism.<sup>44</sup> The year 1937 obviously lent itself much less to such a sentiment. The destruction of European Jewry, then the birth of the state of Israel, soon brought their sanction to the efforts deployed by nationalist historians.

In 1936, Yitzhak Fritz Baer (1888–1980), educated in Germany and Strasbourg, France, and after 1930 a professor of Jewish history at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, published in Berlin a short book in German, significantly titled *Galut* (Exile); it was “a profoundly Zionist reading” of the history of the Jewish people in exile.<sup>45</sup> Isaac Abravanel is allotted a full chapter in the book. Very few individuals were judged worthy of such an honor: Judah ha-Levi (ca. 1075–1141), Moses Maimonides (1138–1204), Solomon Ibn Verga (second half of the fifteenth century–first quarter of the sixteenth), and Shabbetai Tsevi (1626–76).

As part of such a select company, Abravanel was invested with a rather particular and especially prominent function. The few pages Baer devotes to him betray a profoundly ambiguous relationship to the man. Abravanel is presented as “the true founder of the science of Judaism.” His attitude toward the Marranos (whom he considered an integral and forever indissociable part of the Jewish people) and, more generally, his definition of Israel as a people and not solely a religious community led “for the first time” to a realist and modern approach to the idea of the nation in Jewish history. At the same time, however, Abravanel remained bound to medieval patterns of thought, believing that the Jews are not submitted to the yoke of natural law that governs the history of nations; he was “almost as helpless” when confronted with the Exile as the rest of medieval Jewry. Helpless and fundamentally passive, the man of state who was so effective in the service of non-Jews did not have the slightest idea how to truly improve the situation of his coreligionists. He had not imagined for a single moment how to take practical steps toward the redemption he himself was announcing. And the believer who had worked so hard to convince the skeptics of the miraculous powers of the Holy Land did not even consider it useful to go there personally.<sup>46</sup>

At a later point, Baer returned to the regrets that the study of the tragic fate of Spanish Jewry could awaken in his contemporaries. In his history of the Jews of Christian Spain (published in Hebrew in 1945), he observed with some bitterness that the moment had undoubtedly not yet come for a fundamental reevaluation of political and historical conceptions. It was the “mythicizing mentality” of the Jews of the period that made them incapable of seeking the “real ways of national rebirth.”<sup>47</sup>

In a few pages, Baer imprints an historiographical image that was to prove lasting. Abravanel, however great a Jew he may have been, was the incarnation par excellence of the Jew of the Exile. Through his writings, he had powerfully galvanized a certain national Jewish consciousness, but, at the same time, had prevented that consciousness from being translated into reality. Such an approach did not, of course, delegitimize the ethnic memory of Abravanel, which was in fact part of the national consciousness whose permanence Baer had noted. Nonetheless, Baer, his colleagues, and his Ashkenazic and nationalist successors could not purely and simply embrace that memory. Like the *Galut* itself, Abravanel elicited ambivalent feelings. Benzion Netanyahu (born in Warsaw in 1910), author of the last great synthesis on Abravanel (published for the first time in English in the United States in 1953), offers a perfect illustration of this state of mind.<sup>48</sup>

[145]

*Jean-  
Christophe  
Attias*



Isaac  
Abravanel

Before 1948, when he began to concentrate on his scholarly career as a writer and university professor, Netanyahu had been an active militant in the revisionist Zionist cause. It is thus not surprising that he felt obliged to judge Abravanel "from the nationalistic point of view." His declared objective was to understand how, between the end of the Middle Ages (identified with the Jews' expulsion from Spain) and the French Revolution, Judaism could have experienced three centuries of spiritual isolationism and mystical messianism, how it could have excommunicated Baruch Spinoza and given its enthusiastic support to the false messiah Shabbetai Tsevi. What was Abravanel's role in that evolution?<sup>49</sup>

In this case, Netanyahu embraced an historiographical tradition masterfully incarnated by Gershom Scholem. The Jews' expulsion from Spain, according to this view, "gave rise to deep messianic excitement and tension" whose ultimate manifestation was the Sabbatean explosion. That conception of the history of Judaism after the expulsion, of the reinterpretations and outbursts of messianic fervor elicited by "the hope for a divine liberation from the bondage and degradation of exile," granted a significant place to the influence of Abravanel.<sup>50</sup> For Netanyahu, Abravanel had quite simply launched the most powerful messianic movement in Jewish history. He had given his people the only response that was audible in his time: the announcement of deliverance, a deliverance over which God alone was the master and which no human had the power to hasten.<sup>51</sup>

Before the expulsion, Abravanel had been unable to see the catastrophe coming. In the face of that catastrophe, he thought he could resort to traditional expedients. A realist as a financier and a diplomat, he proved to be too "mystic" as a community leader. While he valiantly fought for "his people's soul," he lost the political battle; his leadership undeniably entailed "a serious fault." Netanyahu was sorely tempted to wonder what would have happened if "a man of the stature of Abravanel had arisen and propagated a realistic course, a plan of regaining the Promised Land by settlement and colonization." The fact is that Abravanel refused that historical choice of action and return. And it was because of his influence that, a century later, Joseph Nasi, duke of Naxos (ca. 1510–69), could elicit no response to his plans for reconstruction, plans then doomed to failure.<sup>52</sup>

As soon as he raises the question of Abravanel's Jewish intellectual legacy, Netanyahu, rather than cite names and texts, very quickly gets lost in generalities of that kind.<sup>53</sup> It is as if when *judging* Abravanel, he had more confidence in his *intuition* than in his *learning*. Today, that conception of the history of Judaism and the role of Abravanel is hotly contested. The impact of the expulsion has been reevaluated, the cen-

trality of messianic preoccupations in subsequent Jewish thought has been questioned, and Abravanel has been presented as an atypical fifteenth-century Jewish philosopher, at least in the very keen interest he manifested for eschatological questions.<sup>54</sup> And without a doubt, that revision itself, or rather the fact that it is *possible*, presupposes a profound change in mentality, and not only among scholars. The intrinsically nationalist and Zionist interpretation which Netanyahu ardently supported no longer corresponds to the atmosphere of the times. To every age its memory.

On one point, however—the political passivity of Abravanel—Netanyahu still has his heirs, though it is improbable he would recognize them as legitimate. In fact, the emphasis has shifted, and the tone has been modified. Netanyahu's embarrassment, his reservations, have become accusations and virulent denunciations.

In 1976 Gershon Weiler, professor of philosophy at Tel Aviv University, published the Hebrew translation of his book (originally written in English) examining the problem of relations between religion and the state within the context of the Jewish tradition in general and the Jewish state in particular. This global reflection elicited intense controversies in Israel. The central thesis of the book is that “the Jewish religion and the existence of this state are antithetical to each other by their very essence.” At the same time, for Weiler, the Jewish religious tradition rests on the deliberate decision to anchor Judaism in foundations that are not just apolitical, but actually antipolitical; and that tradition could not in any way accommodate itself to the existence of a secular Jewish state.<sup>55</sup> Such a thesis was certain to provoke stormy debates; it raised in particularly clear terms the question of the relation between the Jewish state and halakhic authority.<sup>56</sup>

Weiler, situating himself explicitly in the tradition of Spinoza, sees Abravanel as the theorist par excellence of what he himself is tracking down and vigorously denouncing.<sup>57</sup> He acknowledges that Abravanel remains little known, and he himself seems to know him only second-hand: he is almost entirely dependent on Netanyahu (though he does not refrain from criticizing him for errors). As the final actor in a course begun by Flavius Josephus (37–ca. 100) and Philo of Alexandria (13 B.C.E.–54 C.E.), and continued by Maimonides, Abravanel, in Weiler's view, represented the fulfillment of the theocratic idea in Judaism. Abravanel's approach was disastrous both for Jewish thought and Jewish history. In making Jews a political exception, in believing that the system of laws governing the non-Jewish world could not be applied to them, and in placing them, in the last analysis, under the direct and exclusive guardianship of God—condemned to passively wait for a redemption

that could only come from on high—Abravanel irremediably denied Jews any right to an autonomous political existence. A champion of political passivity (for the Jews), the Spanish rabbi had developed a true “ideology of submission” and “articulated in philosophical terms the ideology implicit in the condition of Exile, i.e., in the inescapable powerlessness of the Jews.”<sup>58</sup>

This condemnation is final, with no possibility of appeal. The “little known” thinker has assumed the form of a bogey—and a symbol. Although perhaps heir to the historiographical tradition of Baer and Netanyahu, Weiler takes that tradition to a new extreme. Abravanel comes to incarnate what has always blocked, and what continues to block, the complete realization of the national liberation movement. According to Weiler, Abravanel would have no doubt agreed that the Jewish state “ought not to have come into existence at all and now that it exists, it can be said to be in continuous rebellion against God’s will.”<sup>59</sup> As the object of a reductive and radically negative memory, Abravanel is no longer anything but that against which the future has to construct itself. This time, there is nothing left of Abravanel the historical stage, the indispensable phase in maintaining and consolidating a national consciousness destined to reach maturity and final form in the Zionist project. As for Camhy’s totem, the crystallization of collective identity, it is as if it had never existed. Forgetful memory.

### **A Face and Its Veils**

And it came to pass, when Moses came down from Mount Sinai with the two tables of testimony in Moses’ hand, when he came down from the mount, that Moses wist not that the skin of his face shone while he talked with him. And when Aaron and all the children of Israel saw Moses, behold, the skin of his face shone; and they were afraid to come nigh him. And Moses called unto them; and Aaron and all the rulers of the congregation returned unto him; and Moses talked with them. And afterward all the children of Israel came nigh; and he gave them in commandment all that the Lord had spoken with him in Mount Sinai. And till Moses had done speaking with them, he put a veil on his face (Exodus 34:29–33).

Who would not be tempted at the end of this journey to paraphrase Voltaire as he inquired about the existence of Moses: “Is it really true there was an Abravanel?”<sup>60</sup> Was there *one* Abravanel? Perhaps. More than one? That is more certain. These Abravanel are so many composite images of an individual who is called upon to take a place and play

a role in successive or concurrent “memory landscapes.”<sup>61</sup> These contrasting, yet always somewhat related, images borrow from one another, challenge one another, respond to one another.

What relation does the man Abravanel, the historical man, have with these memory doubles? We would be wrong to believe that these relations are purely fictive, artificial, or arbitrary.<sup>62</sup> Memory is exegesis, and the individual is its text. The voice of the commentaries, however broad or commanding it may sometimes be, never totally covers up the voice of the text.

Abravanel is a figure fashioned of gold. And, in his writings and actions, he himself helped forge that figure. Abravanel is one of the rare Jewish authors in the Middle Ages whose life, quite simply, *can* be narrated. And it is to him, a valuable autobiographer, that we are indebted in great part for what we know. He recounted everything himself: the history of his people, of himself, memory and hope. He himself transformed his life into text. Everything was laid out so that commentary could flourish.

Memory reconstitutes, disconnects, and couples. Memory is a kaleidoscope. And from one image to the next, we often discover the same elements associated and illuminated in different ways. To give a single example: Abravanel as practitioner and theorist of politics. No memory overlooks that. Each seizes on the true originality in the individual (what other Jew of the Exile went as far as he did in this area?). Thus he may be portrayed as the odious court Jew, the good “state Jew,” as a near king or messiah, or, if necessary, as the slave justifying servitude and the apostle of resignation. He is practically whatever you like. But that is the point: you will always find in him what you like. Such is the price of glory and of ambiguity.

What a strange mirror memory is. In it is reflected, ever changing, both revealed and hidden, the face of the one remembered. But in it is also reflected, and to an equal degree, the face of the one remembering. Jews and Christians, champions of ethnic pride and militants of the national cause, all see in Abravanel either their Other or a version of themselves, an exasperating incarnation of a foreign self or a valued image of an ideal self.

In the end, however, who does not know what is actually reflected in the mirror of the Other, and who does not venture to borrow from it? But must one admit it to oneself? Who would dream of recognizing his or her indebtedness? Nothing serves memory better than forgetting. And the less one knows, the better one remembers. All the fashioners of memory encountered along our path, with the exception of Baer and Netanyahu, return only rarely to the texts themselves.<sup>63</sup> Their com-

mentary is organized more as supercommentary. Ignorance and confusion often prove to be generously productive of meanings. And soon memory functions as a structuring force of forgetting. It conceals as much as or more than it reveals. The more it betrays the face of the one remembering, and the more, in another sense, it betrays the traits of the one being remembered.

Paradoxical memory. It feeds on the real or imaginary radiance of the man Abravanel. And it relays that radiance and sends it back to us to diffract it, use it up, and then veil it. Paradoxical memory, which forms a screen, a veil between us and the past. A veil or screen, however, onto which is projected the composite, moving, uncertain image of our past and our present. Of our future as well.

*Translated by Jane Marie Todd*

## Notes

The translation of this article was made possible by the generosity of Mme. Berthe Paulette Abravanel, the president of the association Patrimoine Historique et Artistique de la France/Abravanel International in Paris. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

- 1 Jean-Claude Bonnet, "Les Morts illustres: Oraison funèbre, éloge académique, nécrologie," in *Les Lieux de mémoire*, ed. Pierre Nora, vol. 2, *La Nation* (Paris, 1986), 239.
- 2 On the life and works of Abravanel in general, and on his messianic thinking in particular, see, in addition to Benzion Netanyahu's classic work discussed below (*Don Isaac Abravanel: Statesman and Philosopher*, 3d ed. [Philadelphia, 1972]), Jean-Christophe Attias, *Isaac Abravanel: La Mémoire et l'Espérance* (Paris, 1992).
- 3 I describe that tradition in my article, "Isaac Abravanel (1508–1992): Essai de mémoire comparée," in *Mémoires juives d'Espagne et du Portugal*, ed. Esther Benbassa (Paris, 1996), 273–308.
- 4 In particular, this work analyzes the discourses of authors such as Richard Simon (1638–1722), Jacques Basnage (1653–1723), Louis Moreri (1643–80), Pierre Bayle (1649–1707), Louis-Michel de Boissy (d. 1793), and Arthur Auguste Beugnot (1795–1865).
- 5 See *ibid.* I study such authors as Israël Bédarride (1798–1869), Moïse Schwab (1839–1918), and Henri Soil (b. 1909).
- 6 Ovadia Camhy, "Réflexions sur Abravanel," *Le Judaïsme Séphardi* 57 (December 1937): 124.
- 7 On Sephardic history as "rife with myths," see Esther Benbassa and Aron Rodrigue, *The Jews of the Balkans: The Judeo-Spanish Community, 15th to 20th Centuries* (Oxford and Cambridge, Mass., 1995), 192–95.

- 7 Camhy, "Réflexions," 125.
- 8 Menasseh ben Israel, *The Hope of Israel* [1652], trans. Moses Wall, ed. Henry Méchoulan and Gérard Nahon (Oxford, 1987), 151, 152.
- 9 The Confédération, founded in 1932 and centered in Paris, set out to increase the influence of Sephardic communities in Jewish organizations throughout the world, to link these communities together, and to defend the traditions of that branch of Judaism. *Le Judaïsme Séphardi* appeared regularly from 1932 to 1939. On these questions, see Lise Tiano, *L'Immigration et l'installation en France des Juifs grecs et des Juifs turcs avant la seconde guerre mondiale* (master's thesis, Université de Paris X, 1981), 126–27. In addition to Camhy's "Réflexions," the special issue of 1937 devoted to Abravanel includes a synthesizing study by Paul Goodman (1875–1949), a British Zionist born in Estonia who was the long-time secretary of the Spanish and Portuguese community in London; a poem by Juda Abravanel glorifying his father; excerpts from scholarly studies or appreciations by Olry Terquem (1838), Samuel Cahen (1843), and Moïse Schwab (1865); "Les 14 Points de la Résurrection," by Salomon Hakim; two letters from Abravanel to Yehiel of Pisa; and several photographic illustrations.
- 10 See the series of articles entitled "La Famille de Don Isaac Abravanel" by A. H. Navon in *Le Judaïsme Séphardi* 59 (February 1938): 21–23; *ibid.* 60 (March 1938): 42–43; *ibid.* 61 (April 1938): 54–56; and *ibid.* 66 (December 1938): 137 (hereafter cited by publication date as "La Famille"). See also the various articles on Abravanel and his family in the journal of the Judeo-Spanish program of Israeli radio, *Alfi Yerushalayim* 36–37 (1988): 3–5; *ibid.* 38–39 (1988): 8–13 (abridged version in Judeo-Spanish of a study by Elena Romero on the theme of Abravanel in the theater of the Sephardim of the East); *ibid.* 43 (1991): 10–11; and *ibid.* 45 (1992): 17–19, 84. In France, see the recent article by Roland Goetschel in *Le Temps Sépharade* 5 (1992): 24–25, for the dossier devoted to the five hundredth anniversary of the Jews' expulsion from Spain. It is now clear why Abravanel deserves a portrait (based largely on the dossier of the *Le Judaïsme Séphardi* of 1937) in the *Sépharades d'hier et d'aujourd'hui*, published by Richard Ayoun and Haim Vidal Sephiha (Paris, 1992) and probably destined for a very wide public eager to identify with a hero.
- 11 Elena Romero, *El teatro de los sefardíes orientales* (Madrid, 1979), 1:495.
- 12 On this matter, see Benbassa and Rodrigue, *Jews of the Balkans*, 111.
- 13 See Romero, *El teatro*, 495–508.
- 14 Let us note, even though it was produced outside the cultural area that interests us here, the existence of a play originally written in Hebrew and published in New York in 1919 by Judah Leo Landau (1866–1942). On this author, an early Zionist who was born in Galicia and lived in Vienna, London, and Johannesburg, and on his historical dramas, see Getzel Kressel, *Leksikon ha-sifrut ha-kvrit ba-dorot ha-aharonim* (Merhavia,

- 1967), 2:288–89, and Fishel Lachower, *Toldot ha-sifrut ha-Ivrit ha-hadashah*, 13th printing (Tel Aviv, 1966), 4:34–35.
- 15 Santo [Bey de] Semo, born in the 1880s at the latest, explained the circumstances of the play's composition in a book written in Paris during the Occupation: *Israël et le monde: Première partie* (Paris: 1945), 133–40. He submitted the manuscript to Sarah Bernhardt when she was in Constantinople on an acting tour in 1908; she was very interested, although disappointed that the play had no role for her (135). The year 1908 was that of the Young Turk Revolution, and the Ottoman community, like much of the rest of the population, emerged from its silence (see Esther Benbassa, *Une Diaspora sépharade en transition: Istanbul, XIX<sup>e</sup>-XX<sup>e</sup> siècles* [Paris, 1993], 27–35). We may hear an echo of the hope elicited by the change in government in the scene in which Santo Semo insists on the solidarity (in misfortune, it is true) of Abravanel and the Muslim sultan of Granada. In general, Santo Semo pays tribute to all the myths, from the antiquity of the Jewish settlement in Spain (54–58) to the warm welcome of the Ottoman sultan Bayezid II (58), although he does not fail to stigmatize the attitude of the Turkish representatives in France during the war (161–65). On the performance of this play in Judeo-Spanish in Istanbul, see Abraham Galanté, *Histoire des Juifs d'Istanbul* (Istanbul, 1941–42), 1:223. On Santo Semo, see Edouard de Navailles's preface to *Israël et le monde* (7–10).
- 16 Netanyahu, *Don Isaac Abravanel*, 262.
- 17 Jacques José Abravanel, "La famiya Abravanel: Su origin, su istoria i su mision," *Aki Yerushalayim* 36–37 (1988): 3.
- 18 Santo Semo, *Don Isaac Abravanel*, 8, 17; Paul Goodman, "Don Isaac Abravanel," *Le Judaïsme Séphardi* 57 (December 1937): 121; Navon, "La Famille" (February 1938), 22.
- 19 According to Santo Semo (*Don Isaac Abravanel*, 12), the coat of arms was surmounted by the royal crown of David. Navon ("La Famille" [February 1939], 22) describes "two lions facing each other above the six-branched escutcheon of King David." See also Abravanel, "La famiya," 4.
- 20 Abravanel, "La famiya," 3–4.
- 21 See Santo Semo, *Don Isaac Abravanel*, 8.
- 22 Navon, "La Famille" (February 1938), 22.
- 23 Abravanel, "La famiya," 3. This strange scenario results from the compression, deformation, and appropriation of several traditions relating to the condition of Jews in France and the development of Jewish learning there. On this matter, see Simon Schwarzfuchs, *Les Juifs de France* (Paris, 1975), 19–20, 23, and *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (Jerusalem, 1972), s.v. "Isaac."
- 24 See Navon, "La Famille" (April 1938), 56.
- 25 Ibid. (February 1938), 23.
- 26 Joseph Nehama, with the collaboration of Jesus Cantera, *Dictionnaire du judéo-espagnol* (Madrid, 1977), s.v. "Abravanel." Cf. Enrique Saporta y Beja, *Refranes de los judíos sefardíes* (Barcelona,

- 1978), 2. On the name Abravanel, see also Abraham I. Laredo, *Les Noms des Juifs du Maroc: Essai d'onomastique judéo-marocaine* (Madrid, 1978), 215–21.
- 27 See *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, s.v. “genealogy.” On the sense to be given to the recent and massive increase in genealogical research, see Pierre Nora, “Entre mémoire et histoire: La Problématique des lieux,” in *Les Lieux de mémoire*, ed. Pierre Nora, vol. 1, *La République* (Paris, 1984), xxix.
- 28 *The Abravanel Family Newsletter* 7 (December 1989): 1–2, 3. The first issue of this newsletter was published in Portland, Oregon, in November 1987. Nearly twenty issues have now appeared at irregular intervals. See also the commentaries published in “El boletin de la famiya Abravanel,” *Aki Yerushalayim* 43 (1991): 10–11.
- 29 On that reunion, see *The Abravanel Family Newsletter* 13 (January 1992): 5–6, and *ibid.* 14 (June 1992): 3. Maurice Abravanel’s quote is reproduced in the latter issue as part of an article reprinted from the *New York Times*, 23 March 1992, and also cited by Meir Avital, “Enkontros familiares sefaradis,” *Aki Yerushalayim* 13 (1992): 20.
- 30 Abravanel, “La famiya,” 5, explains: “This mission includes the obligation of all Abravanel in the state or position to do so, to help the needy and to save his neighbor from danger.” For Santo Semo as well, Abravanel was a “savior” (*Don Isaac Abravanel*, 45).
- 31 Santo Semo, *Don Isaac Abravanel*, 24. See also *ibid.*, 25.
- 32 See Yitzhak Baer, *A History of the Jews in Christian Spain*, trans. L. Schoffman (Philadelphia, 1978), 2:436–37.
- 33 See *ibid.*, 509–10, especially the testimony of Abraham Arduziel (510).
- 34 Romero, *El teatro*, 500. This is very clearly the case in Santo Semo’s *Don Isaac Abravanel*, where Torquemada himself says: “I planned it all” (25).
- 35 Santo Semo, *Don Isaac Abravanel*, 61. We find practically the same scene (“Le Christ de l’Alhambra”) in Edmond Fleg, *Ecoute Israël* (Paris, 1954), 466–70. Fleg, however, adds: “And as Moses did with the Torah / He smashed the crucifix to pieces at the feet of the rulers!” (470). See also Israël Bédarride, *Les Juifs en France, en Italie et en Espagne* (Paris, 1859), 292. For a Spanish version of this story, see Jane S. Gerber, *The Jews of Spain: A History of the Sephardic Experience* (New York, 1992), 134–35. This scene has become such an integral part of the Jewish memory that it is the object of a model in miniature in the Museum of the Diaspora in Tel Aviv (see Joan Comay, *The Diaspora Story: The Epic of the Jewish People among the Nations* [Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, and Haifa, 1981], 136–37).
- 36 Santo Semo, *Don Isaac Abravanel*, 566, 13, 29, 69–70. The enterprise also has the endorsement of the Jewish astronomer Abraham Zaccuto (58). Columbus is also very present in the columns of *The Abravanel Family Newsletter*.
- 37 Goodman, “Don Isaac Abravanel,” 123.
- 38 Camhy, “Réflexions,” 124.

- 39 Santo Semo, *Don Isaac Abravanel*, 73.
- 40 Nora, "Entre mémoire et histoire," xix.
- 41 "The greater the origins," writes Pierre Nora, "the more great they made us. For it is ourselves we venerated by means of the past" (ibid., xxxi). Basnage already understood this when he evoked the "circumcized Spaniards, who borrowed the boastful genius of the country where they flourished; and who have themselves descend from royal blood, or from the first tribe, even though they have no distinctive characteristic that raises them above their brothers" (*Histoire des Juifs depuis Jésus-Christ jusqu'à présent pour servir de continuation à l'histoire de Joseph*, new ed. [La Haye, 1716–21], 7:253).
- 42 Henri Soil, *Don Isaac Abravanel (1437–1508), sa vie et ses oeuvres* (Paris, n.d.). On this opusculé, see Attias, "Isaac Abravanel." Yitshak Baer, "Don Yitshak Abravanel ve-yahaso el beayot ha-historyah ve-hamedinah," *Tarbiz* 8 (1937): 241–59; Abraham Heschel, *Don Jizchak Abravanel* (Berlin, 1937); S. Levy, *Isaac Abravanel as a Theologian* (London, 1939); Jacob S. Minkin, *Abravanel and the Expulsion of the Jews from Spain* (New York, 1938); Erwin J. Rosenthal, *Don Isaac Abravanel: Financier, Statesman and Scholar, 1437–1937* (Manchester, 1937); Joseph Sarachek, *Don Isaac Abravanel* (New York, 1938); Moshe Zvi Segal, "R. Yitshak Abravanel be-tor parshan ha-mikra," *Tarbiz* 8 (1937): 261–99; J. B. Trend and Herbert Loewe, eds., *Isaac Abravanel: Six Lectures* (Cambridge, 1937).
- 43 On the exhibition, see *The Abravanel Family Newsletter* 1 (November 1987): 3; ibid. 13 (January 1992): 1–2. Soil, *Don Isaac Abravanel*, 10–11; Santo Semo, *Israël et le monde*, 139–40. On Navon (born in Adrianople in 1864, member of the staff of the Alliance Israélite Universelle, director of the Ecole Normale Israélite Orientale, and author of two novels of Jewish mores in the East), see the biographical entry in his work *Les 70 Ans de l'Ecole normale israélite orientale (1865–1935)* (Paris, 1935), 126. See also the moving last installment of "La Famille de Don Isaac Abravanel" in *Le Judaïsme Séphardi* 66 (December 1938): 137.
- 44 See Benbassa and Rodrigue, *Jews of the Balkans*, 194.
- 45 On Baer, see *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 4:82–83. *Galut* appeared in Hebrew in 1945 and in English in 1947. See Jacob Neusner, introduction to *Galut* by Yitshak Fritz Baer, trans. Robert Warshow (London, 1988), 4.
- 46 Baer, *Galut*, 60–68.
- 47 Baer, *Jews in Christian Spain*, 2:442. See Gérard Nahon's severe judgment in *Métropoles et périphéries sépharades d'Occident: Kairouan, Amsterdam, Bayonne, Bordeaux, Jérusalem* (Paris, 1993), 248.
- 48 Netanyahu, *Don Isaac Abravanel*. The second edition appeared in 1968, the third in 1972, and a paperback edition in 1982. On Netanyahu, see *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 12:970–71.
- 49 Netanyahu, *Don Isaac Abravanel*, 91; 1st ed., vii–viii. We note in passing that Netanyahu dedicated his book to the memory of his father, Nathan Mileikowsky, "whose life-work for Zionism and whose nobility of spirit are still sources of inspiration."

- 50 Gershom G. Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism* (New York, 1971), 41, 86. See, for example, Gershom G. Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi: The Mystical Messiah, 1626–1676* (Princeton, N.J., 1973), 14, where Abravanel's influence is linked to that of R. Judah Loew of Prague (1512–1609).
- 51 Netanyahu, *Don Isaac Abravanel*, 251, 256–57.
- 52 *Ibid.*, 90, 91, 89, 255–56, 156. See also 225, where Abravanel is portrayed as the incarnation of the paradox of the medieval Jewish condition: as soon as the future of his people is at stake, Abravanel becomes a passive dreamer and builds “castles in the air.”
- 53 A few names are cited, of course (*ibid.*, 254): Juda Abravanel, Azaria de Rossi (ca. 1511–ca. 1578); Moses Alshekh (d. ca. 1593); Menasseh ben Israel (1604–57); Joseph Solomon Delmedigo (1591–1655); and Samuel David Luzzato (1800–1865). There are also two very brief references, and even they are unconvincing. The first cites Luzzato's evaluation of Abravanel as the man who liberated Jewish thought from Aristotelianism, an evaluation that Netanyahu himself refuses to embrace: “Yet the greatness of Abravanel was not really in this” (254). The second repeats Delmedigo's statement that Abravanel's works are “a gift from God” (326). Netanyahu omits to mention that, in this praise, Abravanel is in good company, since Delmedigo is commenting on all the authors he recommends. See Joseph Solomon Delmedigo, *Épître à Zérah ben Natan le Karaïte de Troki*, trans. Maurice-Ruben Hayoun, appendix to *Examen de la religion*, by Elijah Delmédigo (Paris, 1992), 106–39. Abravanel appears several times in this work: 127, 128, 132 (the passage cited by Netanyahu), and 134.
- 54 See, among others, Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives* (New Haven and London, 1988), 264–67, and *idem*, “Religion, Thought and Attitudes: The Impact of the Expulsion of the Jews,” in *Spain and the Jews: The Sephardi Experience 1492 and After*, ed. Elie Kedourie (London, 1992), 123–39, esp. 125–29, 134.
- 55 Gershon Weiler, *Jewish Theocracy* (Leiden, 1988), xiii, xiv.
- 56 The implications of Weiler's analysis have been usefully underscored by Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *Les Juifs, la mémoire et le présent II* (Paris, 1991), 15–16.
- 57 See Weiler, *Jewish Theocracy*, xiv, and the chapter devoted to Spinoza (86–110).
- 58 *Ibid.*, 69–85, 98–99, esp. 85, 70.
- 59 *Ibid.*, 82–83.
- 60 “Is it really true there was a Moses?” (*Dictionnaire philosophique*, with a preface by René Pomeau [Paris, 1964], s.v. “Moïse”).
- 61 Nora, “Entre mémoire et histoire,” xxxvi.
- 62 “Things do not have that simplicity. Myth is not opposed to reality as false is to true: it accompanies reality and, I venture to say, borders it” (Vidal-Naquet, *Les Juifs*, 35).
- 63 And, as we have seen, even these historians, when making judgments, desert the field of knowledge for intuition.



Copyright of *Jewish Social Studies* is the property of Indiana University Press and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.