

The Joy of Thinking: Shmuel Trigano

by Nidra Poller (April 2014)

Denmark has banned “ritual slaughter.” Why? Both Muslim and Jewish authorities had already accepted non-penetrating stunning prior to halal or kosher slaughter. There are no kosher slaughterhouses left in Denmark. But that’s not the issue. Agriculture Minister Dan Jørgensen justifies the ban, enacted on February 13th and effective on the 17th, on the grounds that “animal rights come before religious rights.” Similar bans have been imposed in Poland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, Lichtenstein, and the Netherlands. What next?

What can explain this seemingly endless wave of hostility against Jews, Judaism, and Zionism either singled out or, as in this case, lumped together with Islam? Confused do-gooders, adding animals to their exquisite concern for the welfare of living creatures, are tearing at the body of Western civilization. The gullible multitude swallows the hype. What is the future of Jews in such a world?

Intense debate has been underway since the dawn of the 21st century, nowhere more fertile than in France, at the European epicenter of the international storm. Our survival depends on our capacity to think! To think clearly, precisely, profoundly, and coherently. High on the list of the Jewish thinkers who have risen to the challenge, Shmuel Trigano gives us keys to understanding our predicament and, hopefully, averting catastrophe. Sociologist, philosopher, academic, prolific writer, he sheds light on the perverse process that leads to the lumping together of Jews and Muslims (as foreign bodies), the damning of “ritual slaughter” (the term is a horror in itself), and the smug conclusion: “animal rights come before religious rights.”

The subject was at the heart of an international Colloquium “*L’Union européenne et les nouvelles forms de la question juive*” [New forms of the Jewish Question in the European Union], held in Paris on January 26th under the auspices of *l’Université populaire du judaïsme* and founding director Shmuel Trigano, who introduced the Colloquium with a few words about the newly created *Université Populaire*, “an alliance of heart and mind.” The aim of this open program of Jewish studies is to examine the Jewish message—eternal Israel—in conjunction with the contemporary situation of Jews, individually and collectively, and the dangers facing the

Jewish state in a post-national Western world. In the 20th century, Jews that had been living as individual citizens of European nations were collectively rounded up and exterminated. Subsequently, Jews were chased out of the Arab-Muslim world. Jewish population today is concentrated in Israel, the United States, Western Europe, and Russia.

The first speaker at the Colloquium, Bruno Fiszon—chief rabbi of Metz and a member of the French Veterinary Academy—who defends *shechita* with scientific precision, gave an inside view of the ferment that led the European Commission to assimilate male circumcision with female genital mutilation, and “ritual slaughter” with savagery. Eurodeputy Marlène Rupprecht, reporter of the commission on circumcision, deplored practices that reveal “the dark side of your religion.” Her colleague Sylvie Goy-Chavent, who also sponsored the resolution discriminating against products from Israel’s “occupied territories,” claims the proceeds of kosher slaughter finance Israel’s army. Something other than animal welfare is at play.

Nine speakers, including Robert Wistrich—author of the recently cancelled UNESCO exhibit on the 3500 year connection between the Jewish people, the Book, and the land of Israel—addressed the “Jewish question” from every angle. Jean-Pierre Bensimon stepped out of the European framework to voice stinging criticism of Secretary of State John Kerry’s misguided peace initiative. Bat Ye’or traced current developments in the Eurabian project she has thoroughly documented: Palestinianism and its anti-Zionist corollary, the peace process as a jihadist plan for the destruction of Israel, replacement of French identity and population, the rejection of rational European civilization in favor of Koranic doctrine, the 2006 Berlin Conference decision to politicize European culture...

Shmuel Trigano outlined the new anti-Semitism that has developed within a new world order: To restore the belief in its own bounty after the Shoah, Europe invented a religion of compassion in a borderless EU consecrated to the defense of The Victim. The victims of the Shoah, bleached of their Jewish specificity and interchangeable with new models, are an object of worship. The nation-state is blamed for the evils of the 20th century and Israel is execrated for its retrograde nationalism, leaving the Jews exposed once more to the danger of extermination if robbed of the protection of the sovereign Jewish state. (A video of the Colloquium is available online.)¹

At the end of this day-long studious exercise, participants discovered what had been going on in the streets of Paris: The Day of Rage, billed as a spontaneous coalition of gripes against the Hollande government, the EU, global finance, and a long list of etceteras, had brought forth a vociferous chorus of Jew hatred from one end to the other of the political spectrum.

"Jews, Jews, France isn't for you!"²

The juxtaposition of the insightful Colloquium and the real life manifestation of Jew hatred in distressed French society is a fitting example of the brainspan of Shmuel Trigano, stretching from an inspired interpretation of the founding texts of Judaism to a sharp intuition of the clear and present danger that threatens flesh and blood Jewish people.

Like many others, I discovered Trigano in 2001, with the publication of a quarterly bulletin, *l'Observatoire du Monde Juif*, that broke through a government and media blackout on attacks against Jews and Jewish property. Each issue of the *Observatoire* listed anti-Semitic acts (8 full pages in the first quarter of 2001) along with essays by Trigano and astute collaborators, focused on specific themes—media bias, Islamism and the Jews, the New Left and Israel, Israel the pariah state... Trigano traced the sociological twists by which a long-standing well-integrated Jewish community respectful of the laws and the spirit of the French République was accused of "*communautarisme*" (clannishness) for coming together to defend itself from the violent anti-Semitism of a recent Muslim immigrant population, hostile to the host country and its values. Later, when the reality could no longer be denied, unprovoked attacks on Jews were travestied as inter-ethnic clashes.

Trigano gave a comprehensive analysis of repercussions of the "Al Aqsa Intifada" in France in *La démission de la République/Juifs et musulmans en France* [resignation of la République/Jews and Muslims in France], published in 2003.³ There is nothing ideological, emotional, essentialist, or ethnically competitive about his reflection on national identity under the pressure of an unprecedented influx of immigrants from North and sub-Saharan African nations that have been historically in conflict with the West. A population that rejected modernity—experienced "in reverse" as colonization—and practices an unreformed religion that remains inimical to European values will inevitably acquire political clout in a democratic nation that makes no demands on them and shirks its own identity.

Integration, says Trigano, is impossible in the absence of national identity. The current situation, which makes life impossible for French Jews, will create chaos in society at large. The short-lived "victory" of Muslim immigrants, allowed to assert their theoretical domination and claim their rightful place without accepting national values, will inevitably create a prejudicial backlash. He concludes with hopes for a positive outcome based on a pact similar to the agreement made between Napoleon and Jewish authorities that led to the granting of citizenship rights to French Jews. An Islam of France (as opposed to an Islam in France) would formally renounce precepts such as jihad, death to apostates, dominion over infidels,

polygamy, oppression of women... No simple task! And Trigano does not toss out the idea like a politician on the campaign trail. Events since "*La demission*" was published have confirmed the diagnosis and potential solution. The alternative—multiculturalism—is producing exactly the backlash he predicted.

Impressed by Trigano's lucidity, coherence, integrity, and foresight, I went out of my way to attend any colloquium he organized—including a notable one on the al Dura hoax—read his essays on current events, contributed to the review *Controverses* he edited from 2006 to 2011, thick handsome volumes that expand the depth and scope of the *Observatoire*. One issue, for example,⁴ explored the phenomenon of "*alterjuifs*," a term coined to replace the misnomer "self-hating Jews." In 2010 Trigano short-circuited an attempt to create a European version of J Street: the *Raison Garder* [be reasonable] petition garnered twice as many signatures as the heftily backed JCall.

This year I am following Trigano's course at the *Université populaire*. Ah! If only we were taught Judaism that way when we were young. One evening, as the class ended, he tossed out this pithy idea, like someone offering you a second helping of cake: "The soul, I think, carries the flesh." Yes! And his soul carries a generous unpretentious presence with a warm smile on the face of a hidalgo who stepped out of a Spanish painting. "When I'm in the States, strangers address me directly in Spanish." We sat down together recently for a friendly conversation about his life and work. From details about his youth in Blida (Algeria), where he was born in 1948, to an explanation of his quest for an authentic "Hebrew philosophy," Shmuel always makes sense! If you had to sum up his thought and his being in one word, you would say: coherent. He has no nostalgia for the Maghreb where he lived as a French citizen in a modern French-speaking family. His parents were afraid to send him to Talmud Torah in those times of revolutionary violence that led to their inevitable flight in 1962. He remembers tenderly their tragi-comic departure: "My father didn't want to leave. We went to Vichy for a 20-day 'cure' at the baths, and when the time was up, we wandered here, there..." They ended up finally in Paris, like tens of thousands of Jews forced to leave Muslim lands in a context of betrayal, persecution, loss of status and material possessions. The reception was chilly to say the least. But the Sephardic population that would invigorate French Jewish life seized every opportunity to make a fresh start.

Shmuel Trigano is first and foremost a writer. Not a philosopher trained in the discipline, but a thinker who reaches the philosophical level through the dynamics of writing creatively, with utmost honesty and intuitive confidence. After a brief excursion, at the age of 15, in "a Camus style fiction, the beach, the cruel Mediterranean sun..." he embarked on his life's work,

a highly original inquiry that began with the brutal expulsion from the land of his birth. From the youthful question—why did this happen to me—he has traveled, by writing, from the personal to the general to the essential. What happened to Jews, what is happening to us, who are we, what do we bring to humanity, how do we survive?

Picking up at the lycée in Paris the studies he had left in Blida, Trigano passed his baccalauréat, learned Hebrew and set out for Israel, immersed in the kibbutz, the landscape, Zionism, and studies at Hebrew University, graduating with a BA in political science. But the coherence he hungered for was not yet on the program. The dichotomy between “thought” and “Jewish thought” existed in Israel as in the Diaspora as in Western civilization. “Israelis,” says Trigano, “speak a European language with Hebrew words.”

He returned to France to pursue a quest that seemed to require linguistic duality, using French to cast light on the stunning dimension of Biblical Hebrew. With a Doctorate in Sociology, he began the university career that has allowed him to write while exercising his authentic talent as a teacher. He took a six-month leave of absence to compose *Récit de la disparue*, an essay on Jewish identity, sent the manuscript “over the transom” to numerous publishers... and had no response until, one year later, he learned that Pierre Nora, an editor at the prestigious house of Gallimard, had decided to publish the manuscript after getting the approval of Emmanuel Lévinas, Henri Meschonnic, and Maurice Blanchot. The book came out in 1977.⁵

Thirty-seven years later, Shmuel Trigano finds himself once more in a linguistic-cultural-geographic conundrum. The French language, which has lost nothing of its vibrant beauty and capacity for expression, is losing its territorial scope. And Jews in France are tottering on the edge of a familiar precipice. The same Muslim population that forced them to flee Arab lands has now created such a hostile environment in France that many envisage another exodus. The French language once practiced by fine minds all over the world is becoming a backwater, a trap for thinkers whose work is not easily translated and marketable. We who are enduring this difficult period in contemporary French history have the privilege of reading their works in the original; it isn't a golden age, but there's some silver in it.⁶

The outburst of violence against Jews triggered by the “Al Aqsa Intifada” awoke, in the depths of Shmuel Trigano’s soul, hidden memories of the exodus from Algeria. As if he could finally experience the pain and distress and know, once again, the sinking feeling that the state cannot protect you. After more than a decade of intense writing and activity centered on this new anti-Semitism often disguised by an anti-Zionist cloud, Shmuel Trigano discovered, as if it had written itself, his magnum opus, *Judaïsme et l’esprit du monde*.

Acclaimed by Roger Pol-Droit⁷—“an exceptional endeavor... remarkable coherence imposed on a dizzying diversity of themes...”—this monumental work reveals the erudition that underlies Shmuel Trigano’s every intellectual gesture. Jacques Tarnero, reviewing Trigano’s most recent publication, *Politique du peuple juif*, praises his extraordinary intellectual creation, a tireless quest, the matrix of his thought: what is the question that Israel raises in a world relentlessly determined not to hear it? “Judaism,” says Trigano, “is a concept of the world, a vision of the universe and the cosmos, not a narrow province...”⁸

“The world, the void, nothingness, creation are not mysteries, they can be the subject of Man’s comprehension. No magic is possible in this perspective... The intellectuality of Judaic spirituality is touched with grace, informed with a poetic sensitivity. The language ...is not dry rhetoric; it is the contours of a natural landscape... The Land of Israel is that land and that language.” *Judaïsme et l’esprit du monde* [p. 196]

[1] Video of colloquium [now available in English](#) and