THE STRANGER IN THE BIBLE

By

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ON THAT NIGHT ABRAHAM HAD A vision—both magnificent and awesome. He heard God renewing His promise to him. The solemn promise that he would not die without an heir or successor. That his passage on earth, his journey among men would be neither forgotten nor erased. And that the future would justify his past—for mankind would look at the world through his eyes. He, Abraham, would be the first of a line never to be broken, the founder of a nation never to dissolve, never to go under.

And yet—despite God's soothing, reassuring voice, Abraham hesitated; he wanted to believe but could not, not really, not entirely.

Abraham could not suppress his anxiety: so far God had given him little and promised him everything. But—how long could Abraham wait? Time was running out. He was almost a hundred years old. Thus when God told him not to worry—he began to worry. God said: I shall protect you and reward you. And Abraham answered: yes—but I am still alone. So once again God revealed his future to him; you *will* have a son, he *will* be your heir—lift up your eyes and behold the sky; your children will be like the stars: innumerable; and eternal will be their splendor.

Strange, but Abraham still was not satisfied; he wanted more—and something else. He demanded proof: how shall I know that this land will be mine, stay mine?

God's response is astonishing. He told him to take a calf, a goat and a ram—all three years old. And a pigeon, and a dove. And prepare them for sacrifice. Abraham obeyed. He cut them into pieces and divided them into two lots, one facing the other. And he waited. And when wild birds of prey arrived and tried to devour the sacrificial offerings, he chased them away. Then the sun declined and Abraham fell asleep, his entire being heavy with dark anguish. And God said unto him: Know, Abraham, that your descendants will be treated as strangers in foreign lands; they will be sold into slavery; they will be persecuted, tormented. But it will not last forever. For their oppressors will be punished. So, you see, you may die in peace . . .

By then the sun had vanished from the horizon and there was night from one end of the world to the other. Suddenly, out of the darkness emerged a smoking furnace and a flaming torch and they passed in the middle—between the offerings. And God concluded His covenant with Abraham: This land, He said, from the Nile to the Euphrates, will belong to your children and theirs . . .

Thus ends the description—tense and allegorical—permeated with symbolism—of that most important moment in the destiny of our

people. If we are what we are—if we are attached to a past which envelops so many years of yearning and so many centuries of exile, it is because on that fateful night shrouded in secrecy, God and Abraham concluded a covenant which may be viewed as a prefiguration of all that was to follow—until the end of times.

This passage in Scripture is disquieting notwithstanding its beauty and meaning; its mystery is enhanced by its visual aspect. What began as inner vision ends up as theater. Therefore it deserves our careful scrutiny.

Needless to remind you that it has been examined by many biblical commentators who all felt that the text was puzzling on more than one level.

First of all, psychologically. Abraham—at this moment of his life—does not need to be reassured; he has just defeated the mightiest kings in the region; he is powerful, rich, respected, feared and loved.

אל תירא אברהם אנכי מגן לך. *Al tira?* Do not worry? If Abraham could ever live without worry, it is *now*.

Furthermore: how is one to explain Abraham's sudden skepticism? He—the first believer, the convincing messenger—doubts God's pledge to the point of demanding proof? Did he have to remind God that he had no successor? Didn't God know that?

Also: what is the meaning of the stage-directions

given by God? The animals, the birds, the smoking furnace, the burning torch—what do they all mean?

And then: when was Abraham awake and when was he asleep? It is not clear in the text. The scene is composed of three parts. It opens with Abraham hearing God's voice in a vision; it develops with God telling him to go out—*hachutza*—out of where? and where to? And it ends with Abraham's anguish—while he is asleep—with God foretelling exile and redemption. Was the covenant only a dream? a hallucination? God spoke and Abraham slept?

More important: why did Abraham accept the terms of the covenant? Why didn't he protest against sending his children into exile? Why did he accept suffering on their behalf? Why were they to become strangers?

The Talmud and Rashi—and countless commentators—felt so disturbed, and so moved, by this striking episode that they had to explain it somehow.

(One explanation was that Abraham was afraid precisely *because* he had been so victorious: afraid of having exhausted his . . . credit. So God had to restore his self-confidence: do not worry, this is only the beginning, more rewards will come to you.)

Why did he demand proof? Rabbi Hiyya berabbi Hanina said: this demand shows his humility and not his arrogance: he wanted proof that he, Abraham, would be worthy of his future. The

sacrifices? A hint of future rituals in the Temple. The darkness? The long night of exile. The fire and the flame? Symbols of punishment but also of glory and royalty.

Secular scholars offer their own interpretation. For them, the spectacle is nothing but a reflection of ancient pagan rituals, quite common in that region, and whose vestiges survived until the time of Jeremiah.

The text is important because here, for the first time, the term *stranger* is used: "And your descendants will be strangers in foreign lands . . ."

Why is the term *stranger* linked to a promise? Why is it part of a covenant? What kind of promise is it, anyway? Furthermore: Who is a stranger? What is a stranger? When does someone become a stranger—and for how long? What must he say, do or feel—or make you feel—to be so called? And then: is he to be fought or befriended?

Man, by definition, is born a stranger: coming from nowhere, he is thrust into an alien world which existed before him—a world which didn't need him. And which will survive him.

A stranger, he goes through life meeting other strangers. His only constant companion? Death. Or God. And neither has a name. Or a face. Are they strangers to him?

Yes—no topic, no problem is as urgent to our generation, haunted by an all-pervasive feeling of loss, failure and isolation. Once upon a time, past

civilizations were remembered for their temples and works of art—or for their pyramids and idols; ours may well be remembered for certain words and expressions, such as: uselessness, absurdity, alienation.

Existential philosophers use them to build and illustrate their concept of contemporary man as closed-in, rejected, crushed, empty, desperate and irrevocably doomed. And estranged from both the world and himself. According to this approach, there is between man and society a wall never to be abolished, between man and his conscience an abyss never to be bridged. He can neither love nor hate—help nor be helped. He is not free to define himself as mortal among mortals; he is not free—period. His very existence lies in doubt. Whatever he may do, he will do as a stranger; whatever he may hope, his hope will perish with him—or against him.

One flirts with madness and death—one's own and not only one's own. One tries anything—nihilism, mysticism, escapism—violence and anti-violence, solitude and communes—to awaken, to attain a feeling of belonging, of sharing, of participating: of being alive. I want to exist—is the leitmotif in modern literature. You hear me? I want to exist. There are so many dead in our past that we sometimes feel that we are one of them. So what? Better to belong to the dead than to no one.

Meursault, the stranger in the novel by Camus,

kills so as to sense that he is alive. Better to be punished than to be ignored. Once again suicide has become a romantic temptation—a protest against the indifferent society.

Gradually, knowledge has replaced love, machines have killed imagination. No wonder that in his rare moments of lucidity, man is seized by fear and anguish: who am I? And: *Where* am I?

For the Jew, the problem is particularly pertinent and poignant. No elaborations are necessary. Since our beginnings, with rare parentheses, we have forever been considered as strangers *par excellence.* We have come to exemplify—by our very existence—other peoples' prejudices toward their own strangers. We know their attitude toward us—what is *our* attitude toward them? And how are the two linked? Are we to remain strangers forever? Is there something in us—and in them—that makes us *want* to remain strangers—meaning: alone?

The problem is extremely urgent to us. Our people has never been so alone—or so abandoned. We have never been treated with such hostility by so many nations. I remember a cartoon showing a U. N. cocktail party. The Africans keep among themselves. The Asians, too. And the Europeans. And the Communists. Israel alone belongs to no bloc. So Israel's Ambassador lifts his glass and points to heaven: *Lechaim, ribono shel olam . . .*

WELL—WHO IS a stranger? What is a stranger? Scripture offers three terms which could serve as definitions: *ger, nochri* and *zar.* The same three notions have undergone dramatic change in talmudic literature.

In the Bible, *ger* and *nochri* indicate legal and geographical factors while *zar* is related mainly to spiritual and religious ones.

A *ger* is the stranger who lives in your midst, meaning: on Jewish land, in Jewish surroundings, in a Jewish atmosphere; he has not adopted the Jewish faith but he has acquired Jewish customs, values and friends.

A *nochri* is a *ger* who—for reasons of his own—wishes to remain aloof or separated. The *ger* adjusts and even assimilates, while the *nochri* wants to remain different, an outsider—though a friendly one.

As for the *zar,* he is even further removed. He is not only different but hostile. Irreducibly so.

Hence, in our ancient tradition, we were extremely hospitable towards the *ger* and the *nochri*—and extremely severe with the *zar* who, by the way, was not really a stranger, for while the terms *ger* and *nochri* refer to Gentiles, *zar* applies to Jews.

The *ger* seems to have been a special person—endowed with all kinds of gifts. He was frequently found in the good company of the Levi—the

Levite—who, as you know, ranks just below the priest. Both enjoy exceptional privileges. One must be as charitable with the *ger* as with the Levite. One must not reject the *ger* or cause him harm or loss or distress; one must extend more assistance to him—or her—than to the average person; one must make an effort to understand the *ger* and make him feel welcome, at home; one must love him—or her. The term *veahavta*—and you shall love—is characteristically used three times in Scripture: and you shall love your God with all your heart; you shall love your fellow-man; and you shall love the *ger*, the stranger.

So much so that, in Scripture, it develops into almost an obsession. It is stressed again and again—persistently, endlessly—that we must love the *ger*. And we are told why: *Ki gerim hayitem beeretz Mitzraim:* we have all been strangers in Egypt. Precisely what Abraham heard in his vision of the covenant. In other words: we must not treat others the way we have been treated. We must show them compassion, charity and love. Above all, we must not make them *feel* like strangers. All the Jewish laws—with very few exceptions—apply to the *ger*. Those of *Shabbat,* of holidays, of *Yom Kippur*—yes, he must fast on the Day of Atonement . . . He must not feel left out. He is protected—perhaps overprotected—by the law. He must be given special treatment, special attention, special consideration: he is someone special.

So much so that, in time, the term *ger* came to mean convert or proselyte, a *ger-tzedek:* a just convert, or perhaps: a convert *to* justice; someone who joins our people not lightheartedly—for superficial reasons—but out of conviction, out of belief that despite the suffering and persecutions, or because of them, Judaism is moved by truth and embodies the supreme quest for justice.

Thus, in talmudic literature, which teaches to discourage conversion, the *ger* is generally praised and even exalted—covered with honors and rewards. He is made into a superior person to whom nothing is denied. We offer him not only a past—our own—but eternity as well. We assure him that on Passover eve, at the *Seder,* he may declare—for all to hear—that *Avadim hayinu lepharao bemitzraim*—his fathers and forefathers were slaves in Egypt; and that, like all of us, he was freed by Moses; like all of us, he stood at Sinai and received God's word and His law. We go so far as to declare that our God favors him over us. And Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish explains why: We Jews accepted the Law under duress; we had no choice—while the convert comes to God on his own.

The *ger's* position was so privileged that Moses objected: why compare him to the Levite? Why does he deserve such honor? And God, again, used the argument of the *ger's* purity of heart: What didn't I have to do to persuade the people of Israel to accept my Law . . . I had to free it from bondage,

feed it in the desert, protect it from its enemies, impress it with continuous miracles, one greater than the other, one more astonishing than the other—while the *ger,* the convert, didn't need all these signs—I didn't even call him, and yet he came.

And so he occupies a higher position than the average Jew. There are things we may not do to him—or even say to him. We may not remind him of his past—so as not to embarrass him. Anyway, his past is now the same as ours. The *ger* can achieve what God chooses not to: he—and he alone—can change his past.

Furthermore: every *ger* may claim direct kinship with Abraham—the first convert, the father of all converts—whose greatest virtue was to expose other people to his faith. The *ger* is even linked to the Messiah who, as the son of David, will be a descendant of a convert—Ruth.

Abraham's mission was to attract *gerim*—that's why he traveled so far and wandered so often. The Midrash compares him and his wanderings to a bottle of perfume: it must be shaken to spread its fragrance. Later, the Talmud says, Jewish exile had a similar motivation: while wandering through the world, driven from city to city, from village to village, the people of Israel disseminated God's words, God's truth.

But Abraham was not only a *ger* in the religious sense; he was also a stranger—the first *Jewish* stranger. One who, because of his *Jewishness,* had

to endure the hardships of alienation and expatriation. No wonder then, that in his vision of the covenant, he anxiously saw his people become a people of refugees to whom others would *not* be charitable.

Quite the contrary.

For there exists a fundamental difference between the Jewish attitude toward strangers—and that of other peoples.

THE STRANGER, on the sociological and human level, is someone who suggests the unknown, the prohibited, the beyond; he seduces, he attracts, he wounds—and leaves; he is someone who comes from places you never visited—and never will—sent by dark powers who know more about you than you know about them, and who resent you for being what you are, where you are, or simply: for being. The stranger represents what you are not, what you cannot be, simply because you are not *he*. Between you and him, no contact seems possible, except through suspicion, terror or repulsion. The stranger is *the other*. He is not bound by your laws, by your memories; his language is not yours, nor is his silence. He is an emissary of evil and violence. Or of death. Surely he is from the other side.

Thus in many traditions he was, in fact, rejected, isolated, condemned. He was the nomad looking

for water and wine; the Gypsy asking for a place to sing; the beggar searching for a tale, the fugitive for a shelter, the madman haunted by shadows and the prince looking for the madman. Whether seeking consolation or forgetfulness, the stranger was sent away or somehow disposed of. The tribe wished to stay closed—unified. Pure. The stranger, bearer of a bad omen, could only disturb, undermine established order. He had to be expelled. Or exorcised. Or even killed.

Or—in some more enlightened civilizations—he had to be absorbed, meaning: assimilated. Disarmed, undressed, transformed. He would be welcome to stay but only after giving up his condition, his name, his past, his memories, his bonds with his own people; a Jew, for example, had to become Christian, or Moslem, or Communist—or whatever. He would be offered the possibility of living—and living happily—provided he paid the inevitable *rite de passage,* which was a kind of metamorphosis or trans-substantiation. You wish to be with us? Be one of us. Be us.

There was yet another—more radical—method, one that was practiced and perfected by the Nazis. There, the fear of the stranger, the hate for the stranger reached climactic proportions. His very presence evoked ancient suspicions and ancestral frustrations. In the Third Reich, cultural or religious transformation ceased to be an option. The stranger had to be disfigured. Shamed.

Diminished. Erased. More cruel than pagans or cannibals had ever been, the Nazi executioners wanted to de-humanize their victims before killing them: the stranger had to become an object.

Only Islam—because of its link with Abraham—sometimes showed more compassion and hospitality toward others. Islam is, after all, a religion of people who, for centuries, wandered from tribe to tribe, from oasis to oasis, in search of water and shade. But even though Islam is an exception, its hospitality towards its guests extended only over short periods of time: how long can you be a guest? Ultimately, the guests became strangers once more and had to choose exile, death or conversion—for Islam means submission. The stranger had to submit—or die. The stranger as a free sovereign individual seems to have been incompatible with the inner sovereignty of all traditions—except the Jewish one.

To us too, the stranger represents the unknown; but the attraction he holds over us is one of curiosity and fascination—not hate. Rather than absorb the stranger, we encourage him to remain independent and true to his genuine self; we want him to maintain his identity and enrich it. Except for one or two periods we discouraged conversion. Under Yannai there were forced conversions—and we lived to regret it under Herod.

Judaism teaches us that man must be authentic—and that he can find his authenticity only within his

own culture and tradition. We don't want to make Jews out of Christians; we want to make Jews out of Jews—and so help Christians to be better Christians. We want the stranger to offer us not what we already have—or whatever we may have given him—but that which *he* has and *we* don't. We don't want him to resemble us any more than we wish to resemble him. We look at him hoping to find his specificity. And to understand that which makes him different—that which makes him a stranger.

For man, aware of both his limitations and his desire to transcend them, recognizes that the stranger forces him to recall into question not only his own judgments of himself but also his relations with others. Faced with the unknown, we realize that every consciousness represents the unknown to everyone else. God, and God alone, remains Himself in all His relationships—never becoming someone else, never becoming *the other.*

And yet, just as man can attain his ultimate truth only through another human being, God can be united to His creation only through man. Man needs the other to be human—just as God needs man to be God.

For the Jew, the stranger suggests a world to be lived in, to be enhanced, or saved. One awaits the stranger, one welcomes him, one is grateful to him for his presence. What was Abraham's greatness? He invited into his home all strangers, be they angels or fugitives, and made them feel welcome.

Rabbi Eliezer, the father of the Besht, became a father because of his hospitality towards unknown wanderers. In the Jewish tradition, the stranger may very well be someone important: a prophet in disguise, a hidden Just. Or even the Messiah. He is to be accepted for what he is, the way he is. Thus we hope to receive a fragment of his secret knowledge, a spark of his flame—a key to his secret.

The question therefore is: how should the contact, the exchange, occur? What should its nature be? Am I to approach the stranger in his language or mine—on his level or mine? In other words: must I make an effort to resemble him so as better to discover him? The answer, naturally, is: no. For that would mean accepting his terms; that would mean submission and defeat leading—finally—to dissolution, rather than affirmation of our identity.

Now—we realize that there is in man precisely such a wish, one among many, calling for this kind of end, this kind of death. A wish which pushes him to break with his surroundings, burn his bridges, deny his past and his experiences—both inherited and acquired—plunge into the mass and go under . . . thus solving the problem of existence by putting an end to that existence, or in simpler terms: become another, live the life of another, the destiny of another, assume the death of another—die as a stranger—in order to forget pain, shame, guilt—and disappear—having in effect committed

physical or spiritual suicide.

That urge may or may not be rooted in weakness. Man may feel helpless to adjust to the image he has of himself and so wish to adopt the image the stranger has of him; ultimately he may even try to resemble the stranger—or even the enemy.

But then it may also be related to a more positive passion—his need to renew himself, to replenish himself. He may leave his land, his home, his habits, in the hope that as an expatriate he may have greater opportunities to rethink, reevaluate and redefine his place and role under the sun.

And so—our hero gets up one morning and, without saying goodbye to anyone, disappears. He goes underground, joins a counter-culture or leaves for the unknown: he seeks out places and societies whose languages he does not understand, whose laws are alien and bizarre . . . but those things don't frighten him, on the contrary: he wants *not* to understand, *not* to know. For what he knows, he does not like; and what he understands, he does not accept. He has chosen exile so as to be someone else—a stranger. And thus to discover a new expression of truth, a new way of assuming the human condition in its ever-changing forms. That is why he is on the run, always, refusing to stay in the same place, with the same people for long: he wanders to do away with his belongings rather than add to their weight. And everywhere he leaves one more mask, one more veil, one more

memory. In order to become a total stranger, he must reject the last vestiges of his former self. Sometimes it ends well: Abraham broke with his parents and became Abraham, Moses left the royal palace and became a unique leader in Israel. Later, much later, mystics chose exile to achieve anonymity; Hasidic masters became *Na-venadniks;* poets sought poverty and adventure—poverty in adventure. Sometimes it ends badly: Philo of Alexandria, Josephus Flavius, Spinoza, Otto Weininger and even Heine and Bergson—all were attracted by the other side, and to different degrees, went too far and became estranged. They were not prudent enough. So taken were they by the stranger—that they became strangers themselves . . . to themselves.

What went wrong? They resisted poorly the stranger's temptations. They forgot that we are supposed—and indeed commanded—to love the stranger as long as he fulfills his role, meaning: as long as his mystery challenges our certainties and forces us to re-examine our own values, our own sincerity—as long as the stranger represents the question; but if and when he attempts to force his answers upon us, he must be opposed. He can be of help only as a stranger—lest you are ready to become his caricature. And your own. The virtue of the *ger* is that he remains *ger.* Though he may have become Jewish in all aspects, he retains his superior quality of *ger-tzedek* for ten generations: we would

not deprive him of that which made the stranger in him become our brother.

NOW—WHAT ABOUT the second category: the *nochri?* He clearly ranks below the *ger.* He remains actively on the outside—and there is something negative about his remaining on the outside. We are told to love the *ger*—but no mention is made about love for the *nochri.* On the contrary: we underline their differences so as to discriminate between them. We are allowed to lend money with interest to the *nochri*—but not to the *ger.* Ritually impure meat may be given to the *ger*—but must be sold to the *nochri.*

Why this distinction? Both terms mean stranger. But while *ger* indicates a movement, an impulse *towards* the Jew, *nochri* indicates the opposite: a movement *away* from the Jew.

Nochri stems from the word *nechar*—abroad, elsewhere. By extension—in *hitpael*—it reads *lehitnakker,* which means: to deny, to remove oneself from the community, to alienate oneself from the family or group—while *lehitgayer* means the opposite: to come closer, to join, to convert.

There is something in the term *nochri* which implies a will, a deliberate plan to be estranged: a *nochri* is he who uses his status as stranger to oppose you—to oppress you—to rule over you.

While a *ger,* at least in Scripture, is nothing but

an alien resident—one who came from faraway to share your joys and sorrows—the *nochri* has come on a temporary basis; tomorrow he may leave with his prey; he has always been—and will continue to be—attached to another home, another system. Even when he is with you—he is elsewhere.

Hence the term used by Abraham: *ger vetoshav ani imachem*—among strangers he was a *ger* but never a *nochri.* Even with people very different from himself, he was really there, with them—as was Joseph in Egypt who claims: *ki ger hayiti beeretz nochria.* Even among *nochrim,* the Jew remains a *ger.* A Jew may not be a *nochri* to anyone—meaning: he may not use his Jewishness to attack, to humiliate, to deny anyone else.

But a Jew can belong to the third category—the worst of all: a Jew can be *zar.*

Zar, too, means stranger—and his lot—in Scripture—is worse than the other two. We are told to love the *ger* and be kind and generous to the *nochri.* God shields even the *nochri;* God offers him protection. Not so the *zar.*

Who is a *zar?* Originally the term applied to those ordinary Jews who were kept outside the Temple structure. Then the Prophets used it to describe the profane, the alien, the destructive elements in our midst.

Zar is the Jew who remains a stranger to other Jews—and to the Jew in himself. The term implies a religious and metaphysical opposition to his own

identity: a Jew who loathes his Jewishness is a *zar*—the worst of enemies. That is why most injunctions against the *zar* are extremely severe. He may not eat from priestly sacrificial offerings; they are so sacred that he may not even come close. Too dangerous. A *zar*—the destructive stranger—uses his faith as a weapon . . . a faith that is not really his own: he has taken it from others. That is why whatever he does becomes idolatry: *Avodah zarah*. Others use him to make us become strangers to ourselves.

The term *zar* is therefore totally, inevitably derogatory. *Mahshavot zarot*—unholy thoughts—must be discarded, uprooted. Aaron's two sons perished because they introduced *esh zarah*—an unholy fire—into the sanctuary. When God expresses his dissatisfaction, his disgust with certain human actions, he says why: they are *lezarah li,* they are all alien to me, meaning: they repel me, they anger me.

Why such hostility toward this kind of stranger? The answer is self-evident: he represents danger to man in general and the Jew in particular.

For there are many ways to live as strangers—and they are *not* all alike.

First of all I could be a stranger . . . toward strangers, which is natural and, I would even add, healthy. It may be unpleasant, painful and absurd—or not—to find oneself face to face with someone one has never seen and *know* that the relationship

is one of strangers whom fate has brought together for one moment, one encounter, one journey. A word, a gesture, a desire—and the moment is forgotten.

Or then again: I could conceivably be a stranger to a friend—a colleague, a fellow writer—even a brother. Cain and Abel were not enemies; they were strangers, which is worse. To reject a friend—or be rejected by him—is painful. Here I am, there he is; and I thought we belonged to the same intimate circle; that we were allies, bound by the same utopian dreams, projects and discoveries—and suddenly I discover: a stranger. I thought I could count on him—or her; I thought I counted for him—or her. Wrong. And when I see the stranger in him, it means also that I am a stranger to him. Worse: the stranger in him may very likely be me.

This is serious, but there is something even more serious; to realize that I am a stranger to myself, which means: to realize that there is a stranger in me, someone who wants to say yes or no in my place, who wants to live my life or my death—or even to die by pushing me to my death through self-hate, self-disgust—a stranger who forces me to look at things and events, and at myself with *his* eyes—urging me to give up because of him and not me, imploring death with his voice to come soon: he wants me to be *he* before ceasing to be at all.

One must never allow oneself to become this

kind of stranger. To anybody. During the era of night and flame, the executioner wanted not only to kill us as strangers—anonymously—but as numbers, as objects, not as human beings; he wanted to kill us twice—to kill the humanity in us before killing us.

And yes—there were times when nocturnal processions of tired, frightened people would march to the mass-graves and then lie down quietly, obediently, almost respectfully, some of them asking the killers: is this the right position? Those men and women were dead before they were killed. But there was even worse: the killers tried to drive the victims to self-hate, pushing them to see themselves through the killers' eyes—thus to become strangers to themselves, strangers to be despised, discarded, resigned. In this the killers did not succeed. The last time the victims looked at their killers, their eyes reflected disdain; not anger, not pain, or hate—only disdain.

Do not believe what some scholars and writers tell you: the Jews did not collaborate in their own death; they were not overcome by a collective passion for self-destruction. No Jew became a *zar*. Here—at least—the enemy failed.

Who is the enemy? He has a name: Amalek. The eternal stranger.

Remember: in our biblical tradition, real strangers are treated with some measure of fairness. Esau? We feel compassion for him. Pharoah? In spite of

his cruel edicts, we somehow are unable to hate him—or even to be angry with him: after all, it was God who hardened his heart. Poor Pharaoh: God's instrument and Israel's victim. Or take Balaam: he cannot even curse us . . . He starts to form words, rhymes, sentences, he thinks he can blacklist all the Jews and—involuntarily—ends up singing their praise: poor prophet, poor poet. The only enemy to inspire unqualified apprehension and anger is . . . Amalek. Always. We are unmistakably ordered to strike him, to defeat him, to kill him.

Why Amalek? Amalek, we said, is the stranger who frightens us most—the stranger who knows our weakness and—perhaps—*is* our weakness.

We know little—or nothing—about Amalek. Though we know much about other ancient peoples with whom our forefathers were dealing, we know nothing about Amalek. All we know is that we are told to remember to forget him . . . Nothing more, nothing else. Meaning: we must forget him but remember what he tried to do to us. He attacked women and children—helpless, defenseless people. He attacked when we were weak—he attacked our weakness. As soon as Israel doubted God's presence in its midst, as soon as Israel felt apprehensive toward its destiny, *Vayavo Amalek*—Amalek launched his assault. Amalek: the epitome of the stranger. Amalek: the other side of experience, of life, of hope, of ecstasy; he is *the other;* he exists not simply to teach us, to force us to be strong, to

learn the art of survival, no: he exists to kill us, to turn us into victims of our own weakness. Amalek: the stranger in us, who is against us; he must be opposed mercilessly. And struck down.

LET US RECAPITULATE: these are the differences between our Jewish traditional attitude towards the stranger and that of some others. They were taught to oppress, repress, or eliminate altogether the stranger they confronted. As for us, we have tried to resist the stranger *inside* ourselves. When others were complacent with themselves and ruthless to strangers, we did the opposite. We have been and are compassionate with others—except for Amalek.

We are compassionate even with the enemy—except with the enemy whose aim is to annihilate the Jew in us. That is the Jewish belief. If I must die, I shall, but—I must, to the last minute, resist death—and resist the enemy who symbolizes death. To wish to die is the ultimate insult to our existence. That is why suicide is a sin: we may not allow the enemy inside us—the stranger inside us—to choose death on our behalf.

And now, in conclusion, let us return to Abraham who, on that dramatic and suspenseful night, learned for the first time what the future held for his children. He saw the fire and the smoke, the exile—he saw the darkness and he felt the anguish

. . . On that night he shared the experiences of our generation. On that night he signed, on our behalf, the covenant—a symbol of endurance, significance and survival.

Our generation can best understand the terms of the covenant. We have been strangers to more peoples than there are on earth. We have seen the smoking furnace, we have seen the burning torch. And night had no end. And Abraham's sacrificial offerings were not saved. Of all the divine promises, only one was fulfilled: we have not become strangers to our past. Now we are waiting—again—for the rest of the covenant to be implemented. We are waiting . . .

We asked earlier: why did he agree to its terms? Why didn't he plead with God to save his descendants without exile? to spare them from slavery? What better time could there have been to ask and obtain compassion for his children? Why didn't he say: *Ribono shel olam,* the covenant must be agreed upon by both of us—and I shall not agree unless you accept my conditions? But then, God too causes us to wonder: was that the proper moment to tell His partner that his children would be cast into exile? that they would become strangers? Wasn't He worried that Abraham might become frightened and discouraged—to the point of refusing the terms of the covenant?

Yes—Abraham was frightened: the text says so. But it didn't last long. Yes—he felt anguish when

God first revealed that his descendants would become strangers. But then he heard the last part of the sentence: they will be strangers in foreign lands. Among strangers. Not at home. Not to themselves.

And so Abraham felt reassured. He understood that the covenant contained a blueprint for life in society. To live without strangers could result in an impoverished system; to live only amongst ourselves, constantly in-breeding, never facing an outsider to make us question again and again our certainties and rules, would inevitably lead to atrophy. The experience of encountering a stranger—like that of suffering—is important and creative, provided we know how to distinguish between them and when to stop.

In His promise, God told Abraham that his children would always know how far they could go too far. They would be strangers only among strangers, to strangers, but not to Him. They would return to Him—as His children. And this too is part of the covenant.

Exile will come to an end—everything does; exile will have a meaning—everything has, for God is in exile, in exile too—God is everywhere, and God is not a stranger to His creation and surely not to His people. El is in Israel: God is in Jewish history, therefore in history. And man must not treat Him as a stranger—or be a stranger to Him.

Of course, we are all strangers on this earth

which is older than we are—and yet it is up to us to be true to ourselves, meaning: to live our own life and share it, to assume our truth and our fervor and share it—and then one day, one day, we could all gather around one who has not come as yet—but who *will* come.

And on that day, when he does come—finally—he will not be a stranger—and none of us will ever be strangers again. For he will be—the Messiah.