

# Language as a Host Place

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The identity of the Jewish people is formed by elements that involve migration and exile. Since their common origin, both Sephardic and Ashkenazic Jews have had peculiarities derived from the history of their respective exiles. In the case of Sephardim, the will over the centuries to preserve a language, Judaeo-Spanish, characteristic of the land which expelled them in the 15th century, is significant. Language acts, therefore, as a native land, as a host place. Writing is also linked to this identity process, so that writers are always foreigners who find their identity through the construction of the story. Thus, faced with migration and exile, the function of literature is to preserve memory and prevent oblivion.

We are from the place where we learn to separate light from darkness.  
We are from the place where we bury our dead.

## In the Beginning: Exile

Thinking about migrations, intercultural spaces, leads me to reflect on Sefarad (a word that in Hebrew designates Spain and which appears for the first time in the Bible, Obadiah 20) because, along with its reference to a place, it is a metaphor of return. When we say return, we are collaterally referring to another previous history, to leaving, to exile, an exile which is not always linked with a territory. There are different exiles, which result in a unique expression, in a creative and, in my case, literary discourse. We can point out aspects common to the creators related with the discourse of migration and its construction, with a close or distant interlocutor. The exile from Sefarad is linked to the idea of Jewish identity, constructed, as I will explain, on the path and in the desert, emigration based on several exiles: one from

paradise, another more personal of a single man. Thus, based on this identity, the idea of Sefarad gives a peculiarity to the Jewish identity, which differs from that of the Ashkenazim (Jews of Central European origin) and focuses on a common language and culture. Sefarad, moreover, is a mythical territory. The Sephardic Jewish identity has two points of origin: Israel and Spain. An origin which remains in the imaginary as a place of beginning, a start and return point.

Between the Ashkenazim and the Sephardim the difference lies in the place of exile. The common origin appears in the identity structure, in the basis of the law and culture, time, and festivities; in other words, both have the same essence. Their peculiarity can be seen in the regional differences that mark the stress and sentence structure of Hebrew and Yiddish, a mixture of Hebrew, German and Polish. This

is also a Jewish dialect, another European Jewish language like Judaeo-Spanish. Each of these languages has its texts and constitutes a differentiated identity for those who form part of it. In this way, among the Jews marked by exile, Hebrew acts as a spirit providing meaning, and as a tool for conversation, meeting. Moreover, they use the languages of the host countries and, depending on the group, Ashkenazic or Sephardic, Yiddish or Judaeo-Spanish.

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The singularity of the Sephardim, whether from northern Morocco, Bulgaria, Turkey or Greece, is that they did not forget their forced exile precisely in order to construct an identity which included them. In the Iberian Peninsula, the framework of intercultural relations was a means of national construction that involved the exclusion of the Other, and which began a new way of being which deeply marked the concept of European nation. Throughout the centuries, these Jews who settled elsewhere retained their language, Spanish, a Spanish from the 15th century which gradually incorporated words from the host places. This is how linguistic variants emerged, such as that of northern Morocco, called Hahetia. Personally, I experienced this situation quite normally until I travelled for the first time to Istanbul. Encountering these communities which were so similar to mine allowed me to acquire a close and distant vision of something which was similar yet different. Thus, I learnt something when seeing myself from outside. Retaining Spanish was a sign of loyalty, of course, but it could also be a form of ingratitude towards those who hosted us. However, we experienced it with normality; we were Spanish Jews, and the idea of this as-

sumed identity included two important exiles, from Jerusalem and from Spain.

## Symbolic Space, Metaphor of Belonging

Being a Jew means acceptance of migration, acceptance of belonging to a people who identify themselves with the people who left Egypt, fleeing slavery for freedom. And if what marks this people is the idea of only one God and one law, it is not surprising that there are Jews who recognise themselves in everything that is Jewish without being religious believers. In fact, if the one and only God marks what is Jewish, the interpretation of the idea of God, of the construction of the people and humanity and of man and the world that derives from this belief becomes fundamental.

On the Jewish idea, it is important to note that it is the word that marks us. Jewish tradition includes the dialogue of the voice of God through the voices of His prophets. This dialogue takes place at several levels but we can point out the two most important. Firstly, this “You and I” between man and God in which there is a true exchange of wills. Secondly, we have the prophetic level, the revelation. When the expression “in the beginning” appears in Genesis, time appears as a place, the place of creation and revelation. The revelation of God takes place in the dialogue, as we see with Noah and also Abram (who would later be Abraham). However, while God reveals Himself to Noah to save him, to Abraham He reveals Himself to make His being known and be known in the separation from the other gods. He offers Noah help, intervention in history, while He asks Abraham for belief and knowledge, effort of thought, exile and both reflection and abstraction. Thus begins Abraham’s exile on the path laid out by the word of God (although we should not forget that being man means

being exiled from paradise). The revelation of God encourages us to know Him, to distance oneself, to leave and abandon, to give up the false belief in order to find the only word: “Lech-L’cha, leave your country, your people and your father’s household and go to the land I will show you” (Deuteronomy 339).

Why does the beginning take place in abandonment, thus heralding an endless exile? Perhaps because meeting is only possible from exile; a dialogue which is in its turn exile from oneself to enter the word of the Other. When Abram begins his dialogue with God, he is ninety-nine. God tells him: “Walk before me and be blameless, and I will confirm my covenant between me and you and will greatly increase your number.” And He tells him that he will be father of numerous children and He makes a covenant with Abram, who is now called Abraham. He next tells him: “I will be a God to you and to your offspring after you ... As for Sarai your wife, you will not call her name Sarai, but Sarah will be her name. I will bless her, and moreover, I will give you a son by her.”

If Abram, later Abraham, embodies individual freedom, the voluntary detachment of a belief in order to emancipate oneself, as well as voluntary emigration in search of spiritual freedom, with Moses comes the people’s emancipation. The enslaved people – a real slavery, on the one hand, and symbolic, on the other – must free themselves. However, being finally free is not easy. A generation of free men is needed to construct a free people. The Jewish people wander forty years through the desert, and in Deuteronomy we read in this respect: “All of you are standing today in the presence of the Lord your God – your leaders and chief men, your elders and officials, and all the other men of Israel, together with your children and your wives, and the foreigners living in your camp... I am making this covenant, with its oath, not only with you who are standing here

with us today in the presence of the Lord our God but also with those who are not here today [the generations to come].”

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If we analyse this text we see that there are two fundamental elements: on the one hand, the word, the dialogue, the voice speaking and the people listening; on the other, time. Listeners make a covenant in a moment replete with future. There is dialogue and also a covenant with the future; thus, at that moment, the past, the present and the future are renewed. An a-historical blow that determines the people’s consciousness forever. This is also something fundamental in the idea of the Jewish people, common to those who leave their place of origin and become witnesses. They are witnesses. In this case, witnesses of the handing down of the law, before the parting of the Red Sea, of the miracle that takes place before the people who are a people thanks to exile. And it is so because this is the lesson we want to bear witness to. We are free men insofar as we are conceived as exiles. The origin of man is, in fact, this identity shared with the Other.

## Literature and Exiles

Sefarad is today a new Sefarad where elements of identity cross over: on the one hand, the recovery of the excluded; on the other, the return. This takes place in new communities formed by the exiles who come back, by Jews who identify themselves with Spain as emigrants who arrive and settle in the country. There are also many Latin American Jewish intellectuals who are linked to what is Jewish through the language and thanks to Spanish Jewish history.

This is the case of Juan Gelman, who has written a book of poems in Judaeo-Spanish, with the desire to form part of the history of Spain through the language of the past.

In my case, writing each novel gives me the feeling of salvation: saving my time from oblivion and preserving my history. Thus, I bear a kind of pain and a longing for salvation which are only alleviated through writing. Until I published *Déjalo, ya volveremos* [Doesn't Matter, We'll Be Back], my themes focused on the return journey of the Sephardim. Writing was like seeking in the capsules of oblivion in order to shed light on what otherwise is silenced, sometimes to rescue the archaeology of stories, sometimes to unveil uncomfortable secrets, other times simply to bring forward the future in order to face what we do not see in any other way.

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For me, the desire to bear witness is one of the most characteristic human factors of exile. Writers are perhaps writers because of this desire, which they turn into a source of creation and regeneration. My desire was to enter that memory, fragment it, evoke it and construct it as a story from a language which I finally acquired, because in fact my mother tongue was another Spanish. It was not exactly Judaeo-Spanish, or the perfect unpolluted Castilian Spanish in which my colleagues write. Thus, since childhood, writing has enabled me to grow up in novels and allowed me to definitively arrive in Spain.

Language is the country of many writers, especially exiled writers, such as Nabokov and Elias Canetti. Albert Cohen perfectly reflects the desire of the Jew to be linked to an ancient

history that he keeps present. His work and his personality express the spirit of the current Sefarad. The peculiarity of Spain and Spanish literature is that this history and influence had remained until now in a kind of secrecy and concealment favoured by the disappearance of those who until then were an active part of its culture. Cohen wrote: "A Jewish child finds hatred on his tenth birthday." The writer is, always, the child who shelters under the gown of a Jewish French Sephardic man, as he would say, a "human". In the back of his mind he keeps the ten-year old child who on his birthday is torn apart by the discovery of his otherness. As a remedy, he needs to express himself through his work; this is why in his case the novel is a testimony and confession, a literary construct to denounce the West, part of his legacy. As we particularly see in *O vous, frères humains* [Oh You, Human Brothers], he addresses the others, the inner part of the Other, to awaken within them the interlocutor of "humans"; in other words, human essence, the people we are despite our differences. This relation with a generic interlocutor is a constant in his work, because Cohen writes to the others, as he himself says, "to convince them that Jews are also human." On the last page of this book, the author painfully sets out the thesis that underpins his work: "Oh you, human brothers, who are moved by things for such a short time, have mercy on our brothers in death."

The writer wishes to be like the others while being who he is; but, what do human beings have in common? He finds out that we are brothers, at least in death, but if we are so in death, why not also in life? Perhaps we are more similar than different. Albert Cohen's thought recalls the idea of exile from Egypt, which turns us essentially into foreigners so that we can learn to understand mankind as a nation which must be understood as foreign. He is not asking for love, but for justice, in his case through a 10-year old child who suffered



Young Jewish women in Tetouan, Morocco (Casa Sefarad-Israel).

a trauma and speaks behind the man and the writer, a doubly foreign “human” for being a Jew and eastern, a symbol of the remaining writers of exile. His work starts from exile, from the outside, “with the lips of a wound,” and, from the wound that becomes increasingly deep he constructs his discourse. The act of paying witness contains the original strength. Even those who suffered from the worst human catastrophe caused by man, men who did not seem to be so because of their inhumanity, those victims of the Shoah (Holocaust), found the strength to wish to survive and pay witness. How does man want to pay witness even when there are no longer men? For whom? It would seem that we are witnesses, even when there is no interlocutor. We are both witnesses and receivers of testimony, and this is what saves us.

My experience shows me that each book finds its meaning. *Déjalo, ya volveremos* [Doesn’t Matter, We’ll Be Back] is the third book I published. I decided that it would be a

story about childhood, the story of the Jews in Tetouan. I knew that it would not be an easy book, but I needed to save it, and the book found its meaning. One day, some time ago, months after it was published I received a letter which read: “A name is missing.” It was written by a man whose uncle, he told me, was on the ship *El Egoz*. This story is told tangentially in my book, and in it I enumerate the victims of that ship which sank on the coast of Morocco. The crew fled and all passengers who were going into exile to Israel died, but a Spaniard remained to help them, the ship’s engineer, Francisco Pérez Roldán. He, together with the passengers, died in *El Egoz*. Until now there was no record of this story but the nephew of this engineer, upon discovering my novel, investigated the event and achieved recognition for his uncle’s role. This is why, for me, it is as if this book had found another of its meanings by saving the name of Francisco Pérez Roldán from oblivion.

Faced with migration, the story, its memory, emerges. When memory emerges we must talk of resistance to oblivion. Perhaps this is an important function of literature: to prevent oblivion. “We’ll return,” says the father to the child who is the main character of my novel when, leaving everything behind, they travel from Tetouan to Madrid. They are Sephardic Jews who go back to Spain. Aware of what they have experienced, they return because they are rooted by the strength of memory, rooted in the renewal of time.

## Writers as Foreigners

Writers are born foreign. As with Jews, it is in their outlook and testimony and in the construction of a story where they find their identity. Because perhaps writers, like Jews and the idea of Sefarad pointed out by Antonio Muñoz Molina, know they are in exile although they remain in their place, because it is an existential knowledge.

If we European Jewish writers are the heirs of the works written in our languages, close to the literary tradition of the country to which we belong, to the language that hosts us and to which we feel we belong, we are also participants in a “cross-territorial” inheritance. That is, we belong to a universal literature. Although everybody must feel linked to their region or to their language (even after the exclusion, the expulsion...), I believe that it is as if we saw a personal reference in other Jewish authors who form part of a unique body of a region without

territory with peculiar influences and which singularises them. Thus, there is a Hebrew literature, not written in Hebrew, as there is a Sephardic literature not written in Spanish. I would call this culture “Euro-Judaea” or if we include other countries outside this continent, I would speak of an “eco-Judaism” (a word recently coined by Benoliel, a Sephardic Jew and member of the Academy of Language in Israel, when I asked for help in finding terms to designate this aspect of Jewish culture).

*My dead are in Tetouan, in Jerusalem, in Venezuela and in Madrid, and in each place there is part of my history. Therefore, you are from many places and you can be from all of them*

When I recently wrote that “we are from the place where we learn to separate light from darkness. We are from the place where we bury our dead,” I precisely expressed my apprenticeship of foreignness. My dead are in Tetouan, in Jerusalem, in Venezuela and in Madrid, and in each place there is part of my history. Therefore, you are from many places and you can be from all of them. This is what the migrant learns, after the amazement, the perplexity, whether received with friendliness or hostility. Intimately, in the darkness of abandonment, we learn that being foreign is an open nationality, a way of understanding humanity from brotherhood. If Albert Cohen said that we are body, soul and passport, finally receiving the papers of a common humanity would definitively suppress the need for boundaries.