

Creating National Identity through a Legend —The Case of the Wandering Jew

In this paper I propose to examine a mythical character that has a tremendous influence on the debate over the new Israeli-Jewish identity. The paper argues that the Wandering/Eternal Jew, aside from its intrinsic importance for Jewish History, functions as a mechanism through which the opposition with the Sabra is maintained in Israeli society. Present time history textbooks try to capture only those aspects of Israeli history relevant for modern contemporary society and culture, for the great majority of scholars the myth of the Eternal Jew being a grotesque falsification. Despite this though, the character of the Eternal relates to different aspects of the identity-problems raised by the opposition Jewish versus Israeli and can be absolutely relevant in this sense.

The idea of social construction of reality presupposes both imagery and concepts, but the social reconstruction of reality in a mythological as well as scientific context still primarily consists of concepts based on interpretations of written “evidences”. However, these reflect only a part of the psychosocial construct through which a person perceives, thinks and acts. The significance of imagery for every person’s worldview and for his way of relating to the outer world is often disregarded. This is why the fundamental task for every postmodern scholar ought to be that of *giving*, *appreciating* and *interpreting* meanings rather than explaining, predicting and controlling what happens in the world. It is the goal of this study to search for new manifestations of the old myth of the Eternal/Wandering Jew and to reveal how past realities contemporary Israeli reality.

For centuries scholars of literature, theology and history have examined the relationship between the

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mythical portrayal of the Jew and its tie to the fate of Jews all over the world. The legend of Ahasuerus who was cursed for rejecting Jesus on the road to Calvary, has, over the years, spread the belief that the Wandering Jew was fated to adopt a nomadic existence as penance for past wrongdoing. Thus, the Jew was forced to leave every country so that its inhabitants would forget his political, religious, economic and social foibles. This destiny, it is said, is related to Jesus Christ's cursing of the Jews to wander around the world until Judgment Day.

The myth of the Wandering or Eternal Jew is a constitutive part of Christian mythology. As in the case of all major myths, it carries with it several fundamental assumptions:

Firstly - the label *Jew*, *Judah* and the essence *Judaism* are inextricably bond with each other

Secondly – the label or name - *Wandering Jew* - does not merely denote, but actually depicts the essence of its object

Thirdly - the potency of the real thing (i.e. a neighbor or a fellow Jew) is contained in the name (*Eternal/Wandering Jew*).

The story of the Eternal Jew first gained popularity in the 17th Century when a in Leyden appeared a printed pamphlet saying that the bishop of Schleswig had met the Wandering Jew in Hamburg in 1542 and the Jew's name was Ahasuerus. Henceforth, in later European versions the doorkeeper became the cobbler *Ahasuerus* or *Ananias* at whose door Jesus rested his cross. In the 16th and 17th century these versions of popularization of the narrative of crucifixion were connected to actual sightings of wandering Jew and spread throughout Europe. The Eternal Jew, who appeared for hundreds of years without aging gained in this way a truly singular status. He was considered to have connections with the supernatural for among all human being it seemed to be

the only one immortal. What is the secret of this immortality?

Through referring to the stereotype of the *Wandering* or *Eternal Jew*, the mythical consciousness sustains the illusion that its subject reflects reality. What later on will be known as idealization (the result of misconception and falsification), in these times takes on mythic dimensions and so the Jew becomes not a persona but an incarnation of evil, his facial and corporal features being a stamp of his character.

The character of the Eternal Jew was not described only by his image as moneylender or malicious usurers who flourishes under Christian generous hospitality, but as a symbol of all the evil on earth. The figure of the Jew has been portrayed on every stage, in every poem or every story in European Middle Ages as a diabolic, grotesque and antisocial creature, so that the everyday Jew did not exist as a normal human being. The vilification of the Jewish character turned the Jew into a negative symbol, and thus the Jew next-door became the Eternal Jew, i.e. the “cursed Jew”, the “malicious Jew” or the “traitor Jew”. Jewish identity was dominated by these images of the Jew and through the ages confronted itself with them.

Exposure of the nature of this mythological conception is important not only because of its ramifications, but also in order to grasp the dynamics or underlying principle behind its crystallization. The formation of a myth presupposes certain properties that are transplanted and spread to other phenomena in order to form a “systematic unity” that bolsters the image of the Wandering Jew. The challenging of the established order and of Christian faith all over the world are central components within this myth of the Wandering Jew. The myth is all-pervasive, deeply embodied in European culture – it is epitomized by the fact that the Wandering Jew has invaded even the natural sciences where the

plant *Tradescantia fluminensis* (an easy-to-grow creeping plant, whose cuttings are passed along like a rootless wanderer from gardener to gardener, able to thrive even in plain water) translates from Latin as “Wandering Jew”.

The myth of the “Eternal Jew” is best known in the 20th Century through its revival in the NSDAP propaganda film “*Der ewige Jude*”. This film was a Nazi interpretation of the powerful age-old legend of the Eternal or Wandering Jew (Göttingen, 1995). The revival of the *Eternal Jew Myth* was a powerful tool used by National-Socialist propaganda to justify the persecution of the Jews and prepare the masses for the forthcoming Holocaust. Nazi propaganda filmmakers offered a portrayal of world’s Jewry, so that no viewer would fail to shudder at the sneaking servility and dirty bartering of the Jews.

The Jewish heritage of the Christian tradition as well as the legendary figure of the Wandering Jew, Ahasuerus, was completely changed in the film. In *Der ewige Jude* the punishment 2000 years in Diaspora became **2000 Years of Rat Migration**. According to the film, even in ancient times the Jews harbored each and every criminal trait that they were said to display in the 20th century. Throughout history, they had been enemies of every “normal”, hard-working, honest and creative people. The Jews were purported to be ugly, corrupt, filthy, lazy and perverse. They had migrated from their Promised Land to flood the entire Mediterranean Region, penetrate Spain, France and Germany and move to Eastern European countries. According to the Nazified version of the myth, the Jews of those days carried a heritage of eternal parasites - haggling and cheating, while conspiring to take over the world through their control of banking, commerce, the media and politics.

The Jew in this NSDAP propaganda film was presented as a disgusting individual since his very appearance on the stage of human history. No one would fail to shudder at the Jew’s sneaking servility and underhanded bartering, his inborn perfidy and seditiousness and the vulgarity of his tactics - a brutish and all-devouring hatred that he was held to exhibit, in the pursuit of his selfish goals and greed to control finance. *The Jew* was not merely an individual or a singular person: he was portrayed as a mythical symbol, and an eternal entity. The Eternal Jew was an alien who lies in wait for the nations of Europe, at once an outsider and an insider, foreign and familiar, preaching a system of universal values – the primacy of pure reason, pure and universal morality or the unity of mankind – and scoring the voice of the blood and of primordial instincts. The battle against Evil becomes, therefore, a total war against the Eternal Jew – master of immense powers capable of undermining the economy, polluting culture and the media, influencing education and swaying politics. Every Jew in the world has emerged from the same genetic stock, and therefore even the Jewish leaders and academics – members of the upper class in the Weimar Era - carried the mark of their origins in the filthy ghettos of Eastern Europe.

The NSDAP’s demonic figure of the Eternal Jew is rooted not so much in Christian medieval stories like the image of the Eternal Jew as he reappeared in 19th Century literature. The Eternal Jew had been empowered less than a century before the Holocaust by the infamous figures of *The Elders of Zion* (Poliakov, 1974) more than any other major myths. From the mid 19th century, this tract had been whole-heartedly adopted and disseminated by all professional Jew-haters and propagators of anti-Semitism – in France, where it originated, in Russia, where it was used to incite

pogroms, in Germany and United States and many other countries throughout the world as the ground of every social-economic and cultural disease.

The circumstances of the origins and the evidence of a Jewish world conspiracy were grounded in the powerful myth of the Eternal Jew who, towards his re-emergence on the stage of modern times assumed the character of Jacob, the founder of the Israelite dynasty. Jacob was transformed into the lead figure in this “new” legend, together with his twelve sons – the forefathers of the Twelve Tribes. At this juncture in modern world history, the origin of the story of the Eternal Jew was retraced back to a twisted version of its original Biblical source. The Eternal Jew appeared in different places at different times, but always bearing the same demonic character that empowered the myth, perpetuating and propelling it forward from generation to generation.

Being a rebel and a conspirator, the Wandering Jew was said to have a glorious relationship with Satan. Crime and punishment, rebellious actions and a mysterious appearance linked the Wandering Jew to Lucifer or Satan, as his sinister road companion. Thus, the Eternal Jew was endowed with supernatural powers. This tie can be found in Hermann Gödsche novel *Biarritz* published in the Prussian newspaper “*Kreuzzeitung*” (1868) under the pseudonym Sir John Retscliffe (Bernstein, 1971).

In Gödsche’s novel, the Eternal Jew conducts a nocturnal secret meeting at the Jewish Cemetery in Prague, the capital of Central Europe. At midnight, the cemetery gates creak open and a white figure makes its way toward one of the tombstones. It kneels, touches the tombstone three times with its forehead, and begins to pray. Gradually it is joined by twelve other figures, all of whom perform the same ritual. By midnight, thirteen figures have assembled. Satan, speaking from the depths

of the surrounding graves, blesses the heads of the Twelve Tribes of Israel (Poliakov, 1974).

The Israelites report their activities since their last meeting with Satan. The head of the tribe of Levi is pleased to announce that Israel is now able to raise its head again thanks to the accumulation of gold. Rueben indicates that through manipulation of stock exchanges, all the princes and governments of Europe are now in the debt of the Jews. Judah states that owing to Jewish mass-production methods, all independent craftsmen have been reduced to the status of factory workers. Simon plans to divide the lands in order to transform their inhabitants in slaves. Aaron is the specialist in undermining the work of the Christian Church by spreading freethinking and skepticism. Issachar assumes as target the vilification of the military class and the shattering of the patriotism it personifies through infiltrating the patriotic forces of each country so that they will become passive lackeys of the Jews who, of course, hold no territorial allegiances themselves. Zebulon asserts that the Jews must always appear to be on the side of the forces of radicalism because in this manner, the Jews can use revolution as a front to cover their real goals: to amass more and more power and wealth. Manasseh speaks most persuasively of the necessity to capture the press in each country so that news could be manipulated by the Jews.

The meeting closes with the decision to meet again, as is their custom, past one hundred years by which time the grandchildren of the assembled tribal heads will have enjoyed the benefits that they would accrue as a result of the activities of their Jewish brethren in the intervening century. Wherever the established order was challenged, the sources could be traced to the words of one or another of these heads of the Tribes of Israel. This anti-Semitic version of Jewish life as “unnatural” phenomena

and “unhealthy” heritage was deeply rooted in European soil. The Oriental spirits of the ancient Israelite spread throughout Europe, nurtured within local legends that spoke of individual eternal wanderers who allegedly appeared over hundreds years, without aging.

Many versions of the Wandering Jew’s legend may have circulated in the Christian oral as well as written tradition:

A written record appears in *The Chronicles of St. Albans* (1228) (Anderson, 1965, Poliakov, 1974). The story of the St. Albans monks reflect other versions, yet all have a common theme: all recount how *Kartaphilos* - doorkeeper of the Judgment Hall and a servant of Pontius Pilate, struck Jesus as he was led forth, prodding him with the words “Go on faster, Jesus!” to which Jesus was said to have replied, “I am going, but thou shalt tarry till I come again.”

The story of the Wandering Jew was also told by Roger of Wendover in *Flores Historiarum* (1228) and Matthew Paris copied this version in his *Cronica Majora*:

When as in faire Jerusalem
Our Saviour Christ did live,
And for the sins of all the worlde
His own dear life did give;

The wicked Jews with scoffs and scornes
Did dailye him molest,
That never till he left his life
Our Saviour could not rest;

.....

Being wearye thus, he sought to rest,
To ease his burthened soule
Upon a stone; the which a wretch
Did churlishly contoule.

And sayd, “Awaye, thou king of Jews,
Thou shalt not rest thee here;
Pass on; thy execution place
Thou seest, now draweth neare.”

And thereupon, he thrust him thence;
And which our Saviour sayd:

“I sure will rest, but thou shalt walk
And have no journey stayed...” (Modder, 1961, p.

14)

This episode never appears in the New Testament; the carrying of the cross is dealt with in a single subordinate clause - John 19:17. Sometimes the legend is linked with a Jew who was cursed by Jesus - Matthew 16:23-28. The myth’s popularity, however, was fueled by the image of the Wandering Jew as embodied within the Jewish People as a whole, who for having mocked Jesus, were driven from their homeland and destined to wander on the face of the earth, and who, despite their persecution, still enjoyed prosperity and a good life.

Yet, the legend itself expresses a vital and painful fact: the Jews had been condemned to long years of waiting and suffering on earth until the Messiah ultimately redeemed them. The Wandering Jew paid the penalty and suffered tortures that no man could understand. There is one version of this legend that perceives Jesus as surrounded by a host of spirits during the crucifixion - all striving to sustain him and listen to his words. The spirits also hear Kartaphilos’ words, and they oversee that the sentence should be carried out in full and never end: The Eternal Jew would travel the weary road of suffering until Jesus reappeared and became known to mortals, at which point the Jew would be liberated from his fate of eternal wandering. This

version of the legend says that the spirits accompanied the Wandering Jew, sustaining him in his physical life while striving to sway him to open up his soul to accept Jesus Christ as his Messiah. The Wandering Jew was doomed to suffer, evaded by death until he embraced Jesus. Should such an eternal figure exist, he would constitute proof of the supernatural foundations of Christianity and its strong ties to Judaism.

The Eternal Jew as a Literary Negative Figure

During Middle-Ages in Europe, the myth of the Wandering Jew was used as a justification for persecution of real-life Jews. Even during Renaissance, Jews were portrayed in literature as evil. In fact, Jews were perceived as the incarnation of the devil – the most outstanding example being Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* (1387-1400). This perception is reflected in the words of the Prioress who tells a sad tale of the "litel clergeoun" giving a widely accepted perception of the Jew, in 14th century England:

"Oure firste foe, the serpent Sathanas,

That hath in Jewes herte his waspes nest" (Modder, 1961, p.13)

The Enlightenment fought both legal prejudices against the Jews and deeply entrenched unconscious perceptions but did not change Jew's popular demonic figure. Christopher Marlowe (1564-1593) and William Shakespeare (1564-1616) used the same stereotypes in his famous portrait of a "typical" Jewish figure in the 16th Century in *The Jew of Malta* and *The Merchant of Venice* consequently. The protagonist is very similar to that of Marlowe and Shakespeare's predecessor -

Chaucer. As Shylock the Jew enters, Shakespeare exposed the general view of the Jew in the words of Salanio:

"Let me say 'amen' betimes, lest the devil cross my prayer,

for here he comes in the likeness of a Jew."

(Shakespeare, 1974, p. 203)

Yet, Shylock the Jew, characterized by typical Jewish physical and intellectual qualities, seeks to arise compassion among the members of the audience. Indeed, Shylock was portrayed as a brutal, cruel, greedy and fanatic individual, yet his soliloquy reaches out to the audience to reveal a being who was very human and akin to them – an entity who was neither demonic nor satanic.

"I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer as a Christian is? If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die? And if wrong us, shall we not revenge? If we are like you in the rest, we will resemble you in that"

(Shakespeare, 1974, p. 203-204)

This deeply emotional imaginary of the Jew Shylock has not, however, improved the general image of the living Jew and his mythological qualities and existence. The evil deeds of the Jew in *The Merchant of Venice* have only enhanced his mythical status: Shylock is not a normal Jew – commonly described as pragmatic and materialistic, weak and humiliated, but not looking for revenge. Shylock, as a Jew, made his appearance of the stage scheming to get the Christian into his clutches and shouting aloud for his "pound of flesh" (Modder, 1961, pp. 25-30). The image of Judas and Shylock, the crafty

and deceitful Jew, of the heretic harboring eternal hatred for the faithful are so deeply ingrained that it is impossible for Christians to believe that Jewish achievements have been attained honestly and are proper rewards for their talent and hard work.

The Tragedy of the Wandering Jew

It was only the processes that took place at the beginning of the 19th century - hallmarked by changes in the physical appearance of Jews and their enhanced social and economical status - that triggered a more positive attitude towards Jews and the way they were typified in the mind of Christians. The myth of the Wandering Jew underwent a metamorphosis in Western literature at the hands of some English, German, and later American Romanticists - perhaps for the first time assuming an almost sympathetic mantle.

Romantic though did not seek to solve the Wandering Jew's plight by integrating him into community through the willingness on the part of Jews to assimilate and conform to the culture and values of the civilization within which they dwelled. On the contrary, the Romantics, far more open to the esoteric and dissident through the renewed interest into Greek mythology, accepted the Wandering Jew only because of his similarities with the character of Prometheus. And so, the "Jewish Fate" – the state of the Eternal Jew sparked by Ahasuerus' mockery of Jesus – was approached from a new perspective. Employed by many poets and novelists as a metaphor, the Romantics writers patronized the Jewish destiny, painting it in romantic terms – "promotion" that, ironically, served to reinforce and

amplify the Jews' "rebellious role" in the course of world history.

Shelley's famous analysis in his preface to *Prometheus Unbound* (1819), (Shelly, 1965) reflected the fresh voice of the Romantic Age: "Poets... are, in one sense, the creators, and in another [sense] the creation of the age". In a similar vein, the new aura of the Wandering Jew as the myth had been transformed and passed on as part and parcel of the Romantic heritage - but glorified with a romantic glow and "reborn" as a non-conformist, rebellious and authentic persona.

Influenced by German philosophers and writers such as Lessing, Schiller and Wieland, as well as by Andrew Franklin's play *The Wandering Jew*, or *Love's Masquerade* (1797), the English romantic poet Coleridge in his work *Table Talk* explains how the Wandering Jew is to be found in his *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798):

"It is an enormous blunder in these engravings of De Serte, brought here by Dr. Aitken, to represent the Ancient Mariner as an old man on board ship. He was in my mind the everlasting wandering Jew - had told his story ten thousand times since the voyage, which was in his early youth and 50 years before." (Coleridge, 1957, p. 45).

In his criticism, Coleridge attempted to provide the Romantic worldview with a rational perspective. By citing Burnet in the prologue to *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, Coleridge was evidently pointing to Romantic images and poetical inspirations that established reality: *Facile credo, plures esse Naturas quam visibiles in rerum universitate* - ("I readily believe that the totality of things there are more invisible than visible natures") (Coleridge, 1992, p. 5). In a similar manner, the Wandering Jew was symbolized as the image of the changeless character, treading in circles in a changing

revolutionary world. Coleridge described the Eternal Jew as in the traditional legend - with the mark of a cross on his brow that "God has set his seal upon him". Throughout his wandering and his wishes for deliverance by death, the ancient Mariner represents the Eternal Jew:

"Alone, alone, all all alone Alone on a wide wide sea!

And never a saint took pity on
My soul in agony."

"An orphan's curse would drag to hell

A spirit from on high; But oh! more horrible than that
Is the curse of a dead man's eye! Seven days, seven
nights I saw that curse, And yet I could not die"
(Coleridge, 1992, p. 12-13).

Coleridge's adaptation of the myth of the Wandering Jew in *The Ancient Mariner*, as an interpretation of the myth of Prometheus, is similar to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. In exile or Diaspora, wandering as an eternal Cain, spreading his tale of human tragedy and praying for God's forgiveness, the Eternal Jew was condemned to unjust persecution as an "ancient mariner":

"I pass, like night, from land to land; I have strange
power of speech;

The moment that his face I see I know the man that
must hear me; To him my tale I teach" (Coleridge, 1992,
p. 22)

Another Romantic voice that brought about a sympathetic reinterpretation of the figure of the Wandering Jew is Thomas De Quincey. In *The Avenger* and *Suspina de Profundis* (1987, p.107) De Quincey seeks to explore the life of a man marked by a restless personality and wandering lifestyle who fights his own fate. Of all possible tragic mythological figures, he chooses as a model for his hero the Wandering Jew. By

doing this De Quincey exposed English literature to the dark side of human consciousness, rift with a grotesque strangeness, deep anxiety and pervasive sense of guilt and alienation. Pointing to the fate of the Wandering Jew, De Quincey describes Jews' life as an "endless pilgrimage of woe, vainly yearning to leave the pursuing curse behind" as a "doom of sorrow", declaring that no one has suffered as much as them and that their suffering stretches the limits of normal human endurance.

The identification of the Wandering Jew with a heroic figure appears also in Wordsworth's *Song for the Wandering Jew* and thus the myth gained much popularity among the Romantics as the symbol of human tragedy on earth. But this myth became a distinctive mark of Romantic literature for also another reason: the Romantic poets, cast themselves in the role of wandering exiles caught up in an endless life journey, have seen a parallel between their existential situation and the legend of the Wandering Jew. Here is what Wordsworth writes:

"Day and night my toils redouble Never nearer to
the goal, Night and day, I feel the trouble Of the
Wanderer in my soul" (Wordsworth, 1986, p. 237)

Later, Byron's *Cain: A Mystery* (1821) described the suffering of the Wanderer in similar terms:

"May the grass wither from thy feet! thy woods
Deny thee shelter! Earth a home! the dust A
grave! the sun his light! and heaven her God!" (Byron,
1951, vol. 2, pp. 431-479)

Poets like Byron and Shelly, like all Christians, believed that Jesus had infinite love for them, but hatred and punishment were, in fact, also an inherent part of their destiny. So we understand that the Romantics adopted the old legend of Jewish repudiation of Christ and applied it to their own religious, political and social

goals. Aware of the fact that the legend itself was a religious, anti-Semitic manipulation of the New Testament, the Romantics reinterpreted it and thus giving the Wandering Jew a new status which situated him alongside Prometheus, Adam or Cain.

Shelly went one step further. In his poem *Queen Mab* (1812), the Spirit called up Ahasuerus himself to answer the question: Does God exist? This was a ironic scene, for the Wandering Jew's destiny itself was proof of God's tyranny. For his mere presence at the crucifixion, Ahasuerus had been punished, cursed, humiliated, deported and sentenced to death generation-after-generation, cast in the role of witness to the whole eternal human tragedy:

“Is there a God! —ay, an almighty God, And vengeful
as almighty. ...millions shall live and die,

Who ne'er shall call upon their Saviour's name,
But, unredeemed, go to the gaping grave.
Thousands shall deem it an old woman's tale,
Such as nurses frighten babes withal: These in a
gulf of anguish and of flame Shall curse their
reprobation endlessly...”

(Shelly, 1921, 'Queen Mab',
Canto VII, 84-86 and 143-9, p. 780)

Further on, Shelley's Ahasuerus is transformed into a man, a human being whose suffering has turned him into a fanatic and bitter individual who uncontrollably lashes out. Shelly completes the metamorphosis of the Wandering Jew and thus he ceases to be an exotic, tragic figure, a rebel against God, being depicted as a philosopher following a abstract ideal.

These early 19th century versions of the Wandering Jew rejected the narrative cliché of the old legend. The Romantic poets' portrayals, in essence, served as “antidotes” to the Wandering Jew myth. However, the positive attitude brought about by the myth did not

change the demonic stature of the Jew in the eyes of Christian beholders: their works engendered, at most, a slight shift in attitudes from a totally negative conception to one embodying a few positive elements. Despite his central status for the poetic imagination and despite his metamorphosis and emergence as a philosophical ideal, the old image of the Wandering Jew remained unchallenged up until mid 19th century.

Such romantic ideas flourished in American culture as well. Herman Melville, for example, has found in the Wandering Jew a very useful means for expressing his anti-Christian worldview. Melville held that the natural world was incomprehensible to men and evil, but ordained by God. In his view, in one-way or another, human beings were governed by an unconscious, irrational mind, in contrast to the rational consciousness that formulated religious laws and the laws of Christian Civilization. Melville's world reflects tragic incongruities between God, nature and man. His protagonists do not reject the human condition; they suffer, striving to comprehend it.

In *Clarel: A Poem and a Pilgrimage in the Holy Land* (1876, 1960), Melville condemned “the preaching of the cross” and the “promises...to destroy the wisdom of the wise.” (Paul, Corinthians, 1:18-19). The Jews did not accept the consequence of Christianity – that reason must be crucified in order to increase faith in God. Similarly to Byron's *Prometheus, the Wandering Jew* in Melville's poem alters his cosmic solitude and metaphysical orphanhood to make it a blessing rather than a curse, for the Wandering Jew is presented at peace with his solitude, punishment and fate in the Diaspora:

“Just let him live, just let him rove....
My fate!
Cut off I am, made separate...

...Hence solitude
Elect I; in waste places brood
More lonely than an only god” (Melville, 1960, pp. 24-25)

The Jews were ready to accept the consequences of their tragic fate and disassociate themselves from God so that man could step out into the center stage:

“What say these in effect to God?
How profits it? And who art Thou
That we should serve Thee? Of Thy ways
No knowledge we desire; new ways
We have found out, and better. Go-
Depart from us...
Depart from us!” – And if He do?
(And that He may, the Scripture says)
Is aught betwixt ye and the hells?
And if, in satire of the heaven,
A world, a new world have been given
For stage, whereon to deploy the event;
If such a people be-well, well;
One hears the kettledrums of hell!
Exemplary act awaits in place
In drama of the human race...
God is - man,
The human nature, the divine-...” (Melville, 1960, pp. 38-41)

In Melville’s poem the Wandering Jew is portrayed as a very realistic person and so is his attitude towards the world. The Eternal Jew is the first post-Christian realist, and so his freedom of speech seems infernal to his older contemporaries. When he opens his mouth to say how the world really is, the old Christian metaphysics and theology are swept away. He shows us that the way one should really live is not by following Christian Scripture and the dictates of the Church. As a result of the

pilgrimage, men should not fear the tragedy of falling from grace.

Melville ascribed magical, mystical, god-like qualities to the desert - the place where the Biblical legends found their roots. In the pilgrimage – *a Voyage of a Soul* - Melville grappled with the question of fate vs. freewill: the Wandering Jew’s rebellious provocation was a praiseworthy deed because he rejected Christian righteousness and justification of worldly evil by faith. The existence of the Jew - who for centuries conducted a bitter struggle against the external world - became the focal point of religious spiritual ferment. These romantic views upon the Wandering Jew marked the beginning of a new era - a radical shift towards a revolutionary religious consciousness, which manifested itself in mythical language.

The Metamorphosis through Repatriation of the Wandering Jew

The myth of the Eternal or Wandering Jew has always been interpreted and reinterpreted in accordance with different Christian religious and secular anti-Semitic ideologies. In all these cases, his figure and persona were identified with that of the Diaspora Jew and his characteristics remained fundamentally the same. The Wandering Jew reaches religious, politic, racist and poetic heights – endowing him with the power to break with his roots. Even if the myth is nothing but a “story”, a subjective falsification, it is bond to reality within the psyche. Fulfilling psychological and ideological needs, myth has become an important part of Western culture. Religious and ideological processes can never reproduce and reflect the true nature of things; myths, however,

can frame and give substance to the essence of reality as it is perceived within a given culture.

The ethnological roots of the legendary Wandering Jew are the patriarch of Judah – an anthropological (tribal) label and geographical definition for the district of Jerusalem and its surroundings. The inhabitants of Judah and the members of the tribe of Judah were labeled “*Judabites*” or in short - “*Jews*”. Historically, Jews have continued to regard themselves as direct followers of the ancient Israelite national-religious community. This is the common ground of both Judaism and Christianity and the source of their myths.

The emergence of secular Jews in the 19th and 20th century – a development appearing as a reaction to a weaknesses in Jewish religious and traditional life in Diaspora – marked a fundamentally new phase in Jewish history, prompting secular Jews to champion a new reference for Jewish identity. Swept into a vortex of change opened by the advent of modern times Jews were directed towards major changes based on old messianic yearnings. The same messianic longings that had propelled Jews into exile in the Diaspora in the wake of the Revolt now served to draw Jews out of Diaspora and provided them with a renewed sense of belonging and concrete longing for their homeland. Yet, transposed within a secular context, messianic hopes have always had a universal as well as a particular Jewish significance. The Zionist movement was not only a manifestation of Jewish nationalism; it represented the idea that the only Jewish community that could preserve its unique character and would survive would be the Zionist community. Therefore, every Jew must take upon himself the “holy” mission of becoming a Zionist and to struggle to realize the Zionist ideology of a Jewish homeland.

From the outset, the Zionist movement had been accused of harboring dangerous national, religious, messianic and cultural ideas that threaten the world as a whole. Zionism had been perceived as a new rebellious and powerful movement, an *avant-garde* that threatens to disturb the prevailing world order. The Wandering Jew, imbued with a vision of Ingathering of the Exiles and determined to settle in the Land of Israel without waiting for the Messiah, constituted a challenge. On one hand, for many Christians, Zionism was understood as the first step towards the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. Thus, from the outset, such a radical shift in Jewish history was interpreted as if the Eternal Jew has received certain cosmic unseen messages from the Divine - the true reasons underlying his historical decisions. On the other hand, the Zionist idea - the prospects of a Return to Zion - was regarded with suspicion, being unacceptable even for the Christians with positive attitudes towards Judaism. The prospect of a powerful repatriated Eternal Jew was in fact the fiercest. The myth of the cosmic energy possessed by the Eternal Jew masked completely 19th century realities, for the Jews were in fact humiliated, persecuted and murdered.

An explicit example of such an attitude towards modern Jewish repatriation (namely Zionism) can be found in Mark Twain’s article *Concerning the Jews* (1898), published in *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*. The article clearly reflects such notions along with the fear of a monstrously powerful Jew:

“... speaking of concentration, Dr. Herzl has a clear insight into the value of that. Have you heard of his plan? He wishes to gather the Jews of the world together in Palestine, with a government of their own - under the suzerainty of the Sultan, I suppose. At the convention of Berne last year, there were delegates from everywhere, and the proposal was received with decided favor. I am

not the Sultan, and I am not objecting; but if that concentration of the cunningest brain in the world was going to be made in a free country (bar Scotland), I think it would be politic to stop it. It will not be well to let that *race* find out its strength....”

“Properly, the Jew ought hardly to be heard of, but he is heard of, has always been heard of. He is as prominent on the planet as any other people, and his commercial importance is extravagantly out of proportion to the smallness of his bulk. His contributions to the world’s list of great names in literature, science, art, music, finance, medicine, and abstruse learning are also away out of proportion to the weakness of his numbers. He has made a marvelous fight in this world, in all the ages; and had done it with his hands tied behind him. He could be vain of himself, and be excused for it. The Egyptian, the Babylonian, and the Roman followed, and made a vast noise, and they are gone. Other peoples have strung up and held their torch high for a time, but it burned out, and they sit in twilight now, or have vanished. The Jew saw them all, beat them all, and is now what he always was, exhibiting no decadence, no infirmities of age, no weakening of his parts, no slowing of his energies, no dulling of his alert and aggressive mind. All things are mortal but the Jew; all other forces pass, but he remains. What is the secret of his immortality?” (Twain, 1989)

Jewish history and tradition affirms a universal socio-political truth: it affirms the ephemeral character of all ancient and modern empires, their inextricable decay. From the perspective of Jewish tradition, history is nothing but the story of the downfall of all other traditions and of its own miraculous survival. The new Jewish Renaissance reveals the subconscious fears of the Eternal Jew whose revival and metamorphosis seems to be far more powerful than any war of liberation or any

movement of liberation movement in modern history. For, with the secret of self-preservation, Ahasuerus is not allowed to live or to die. During the whole history in the Diaspora, the Jews were forced to lead a life that was survival on the defensive. Zionism was perceived as a global spiritual revolution and evolution - a transition from the Diaspora to the Holy Land, from the old Jew to the new. Although the Zionist movement had typical Romantic elements and produced its own utopian reality linked to a distant mythological past, its origins and concepts were, nevertheless, well-grounded in European nationalism of the day - namely the revival of Greek, Italian, and other Slavic nations. However, the Zionist revival paralleled the emergence of modern anti-Semitism, which would manifest itself with a brutality unparalleled in Jewish history.

The terminology employed to describe the new path taken by the Eternal Jew includes many messianic concepts such as “rebirth”, “renewal”, “breaking with the past”, “rebuilding the Temple”, “Days of Redemption”, “Time of Return”, and so forth. These terms have become part of modern Jewish nationalism. The revival of Judaism within the modern Holy Land has a religious interpretation. It is legitimated by the promise of the **Holy Land** to the **chosen people** and closely linked to strict observance of religious obligations. The symbolism of returning to the **Holy Land** was interpreted at both the level of the tangible (the Holy Land refers to a precise physical site in the world) and at that of the intelligible. The most important function of the Zionist reunion, however, was to foster and strengthen a collective religious consciousness cloaked in a shared and considerably more focused ideological terminology. The Zionist movement took upon itself the mission of transforming the Jewish People from a People in Exile to a People rooted in their own homeland – a move that

clearly challenged Jewish history in the Diaspora, even if the definitions of the essence of the Judaism and Jewish history remained unsettled.

The Degradation of the Wandering Jew by the New Hebrew

The City of Slaughter, one of the most famous poems of Israel's national poet laureate, Haim Nachman Bialik, was written in the wake of the 1903 pogrom in Kishinev, Russia. In a very vivid and sardonic manner, Bialik described the unbearable state of the Jews in the Diaspora, their humiliation and the murderous attacks upon them. The only Jewish response to such an unbearable situation was to hide or to flee. Christians had invented the myth of the Wandering Jew and given it the mantle of a predestinated fate; Jews, on the other hand, have integrated this mythological character into their own psyche and thus assuming passively in their own lives the pains and sufferings of the Wandering Jew. In his acrid and highly descriptive poem, Bialik assumed the character of the Wandering Jew in such a manner that they came to survive by "making a business of their tribulations", that is by seeking to gain small advantages from their depressing situation in the Diaspora rather than seeking a proactive response that would extricate them from their tragic state. The Jews were the first to discover the power of weakness, patience and sighing.

The Wandering Jew, in this bitter and biting poem, puts his fathers' bones in a sack and as a wandering beggar goes about selling his wounds, his pains and his broken heart to the emancipated nations of Europe and their Christian leaders:

"For since they have met pain with resignation

And have made peace with shame,
What shall avail thy consolation?
They are too wretched to evoke thy scorn.
They are too lost thy pity to evoke
So let them go, then men to sorrow horn,
Mournful and slinking, crushed beneath their yoke
Go to their homes, and to their hearth depart –
Rot in the bones, corruption in the heart.
And go upon the highway,
Thou shalt then meet these men destroyed by

sorrow,

Sighing and groaning, at the doors of wealthy
Proclaiming their sores, like so many peddlers'

wares,

The one his battered head, to other limbs unhealthy,
One shows a wounded arm, and one a fracture
bears.

And all have eyes that are the eyes of slaves,
Slaves flogged before their masters;
And each one begs, and catches one craves:
Reward me, Master, for that my skull is broken,
Reward me for my father who was martyred!

The rich ones, all compassion, for the pleas so
bartered

Extend them staff and bandage, say good riddance,
and

The paupers are consoled
Avaunt ye, beggars, to the charnel house!
The bones of your father disinter!
Cram them within your knapsacks, bear
Them on your shoulders, and go forth
To do your business with these precious wares
At all the country fairs!

Stop on the highways, near some populous city,
And spread on your filthy rags

Those martyred bones that issue from your bags,

And sing, with raucous voice, your pauper's ditty!
So will you conjure up the pity of the nations,
And so their sympathy implore
For you are now as you have been of yore
And as you stretched your hand
So will you stretch it,
And as you have been wretched
So are you wretched!

What is thy business here, O so of man?
Rise, to the desert flee!" (Bialik, 1948, pp. 258-264)

Bialik exhorts his brothers to transform anti-Semitism into a positive spiritual force, an impetus for revival and national renaissance. The anti-Semitic legend of the Wandering Jew, his image and his actions, were adopted by the Zionist movement as a genuine description of the plight of the Diaspora Jew. And for this reason, it was said, Jews must forge a new life in a Jewish homeland, for in Diaspora death would always be a constant companion. Whereas the Wandering Jew previously found solace in passively ignoring and detesting his tormentors, Bialik calls for a revolution in thought and action – that must Jews take their fate into their own hands. In this poem, Bialik raises the characterization of Diaspora life as a negative form of existence to almost a mythical level. The Diaspora is a cursed and defiled land of mythical dimensions, full with existential and religious meanings. A new collective myth of that experience must be forged.

The Zionist Movement substituted the myth of the Wandering Jew with a new myth: the myth of a New Hebrew. This move called for a renewed bond between the Jewish people and the Land of Israel, including revitalization of Hebrew as living language and revival of old Israelite traditions. The Zionist ideology sought to

bracket 2000 years of Jewish history and tradition in the Diaspora and to create a utopian reality *ex nihilo*; it wanted connect the 1st and the 20th Century as a continuum. This “new Zionist reality” demanded a new symbolic figure and a new legend to personify the Zionist revolution and replace the character of the Wandering Jew. The realization of this new ideology demanded a clear-cut cleavage between what constituted the “old” Jewish people and a “new” autonomous Jewish people.

During the 19th and 20th centuries, forging a new national identity was a popular concept worldwide. The modern Jewish national movement, although arising in a secular world, almost an antireligious one, came into being in connection with religious faith. For, the core elements of the new Zionist myth of *Ha'Ivri He'Chadash* that is of the *New Hebrew* are clearly counterpoints of the myth of the Wandering Jew - forever in Exile, without hope of redemption. Zionism's ethos of rebirth, renascence and affirmation of self-redemption was, in fact, not only a negation of Diaspora life, but also and equally a refusal to accept the role of the Eternal or Wandering Jew.

Thus, Zionist national identity glorified the concept of “normalization” of the Jewish people, expressing scorn for Diaspora life, which was deemed as an unhealthy anomaly, a parasitic existence and pathological state. The roots of the Jewish malady were to be found in the nature of life in the Diaspora's life: constant wandering and always the unbidden guest subject to harsh socio-economic straights and subject to hostile treatment.

Zionist education, consequently, was based on two suppositions: rejection of the Diaspora and a positive attitude toward the Jewish People's ancient historical heritage. Zionism triumphed because it was a movement

of the youth in which strong romantic elements inevitably played a significant role. The romantic ideas of Zionism are very similar to those of Europeans and Americans - rebellious ideas and emotions that challenge the status quo of the older generation, drawing inspiration as much from the primordial and still vibrant call of the prophets of Israel, as from socialist ideologies.

Realization of Zionist goals involved replacement of the Jewish identity, founded upon the Diaspora Jew, with an old-new Israelite entity. Such a metamorphosis included the adoption of Hebrew as a spoken language (not Yiddish - the language of the Jewish masses in Europe) and as the basis for forging a New Hebrew culture, the restructuring of the socio-economic context of the Jewish community in order to build a New Hebrews' nation. Zionist-motivated immigrants to the Land of Israel really adopted the ethos of the new national identity, thus actually forming a new society. This new society served as a core element linking the disintegrating life of the Diaspora with all its contradictions to the new society being crystallized in the old-new homeland of the Jews.

Aspirations to become a "non-Jew" – that is, one who did not bear any resemblance to the traditional image of a Jew, was woven into the fabric of the prevailing Zionist ideology as part of the individual's and the collective's cultural identity and way of life. Disassociation from the image of the Wandering Jew was the mark of the rejection of the Diaspora. The act of wandering was assigned a negative connotation, while the act of **settlement** became a positive attribute.

The same opposition - positive-negative – was also the one to regulate the use of the words **aliyah** and **yeridah** – immigration or "going up" to the Land of Israel and emigration, termed "going down" from the Land of Israel. Biblical terminology was further

reinforced, for, if a person immigrated to the Land of Israel, it was said, he or she aspired to high ideals, seeking a sense of belonging and a homeland, but if one left the Land of Israel to live in the Diaspora, he would become a **yored** – a term that clearly became a stigma –, a pejorative label that tainted the bearer as a deserter, a weak person or simply a looser. The Wandering Jew was perceived as an "other" - a person of the past who ought to be replaced by another designation coined by Zionist ideology – of **Ha'Yebudi He'Chadash** (the New Jew) – a figure who would fight the "otherness" of the Wandering Jew through a search for self-recognition and adoption of a new identity that would make him normal or equal of all other citizens of all other nations – in essence, a battle against the otherness of the Jew.

To adopt this new pseudo-historical idealization of Jewish life, the defenders of the **New Hebrew People** had to put aside old Jewish culture: Diaspora culture and its Romantic inheritance of sorrow, suffering and passive hope was doomed. The tension between an immutable destiny of the Jewish People on one hand, and a break or transformation on the other, manifested as constant components within cultural and religious life in the Land of Israel. Jewish sources were employed by the writers of an emerging body of Hebrew literature as symbols, and sarcastically reinterpreted. The fate of old myths was the same.

In Haim Hazaz's well-known Hebrew story **Ha-Derashah** (*The Sermon*) (1970, pp. 219-238), the history teacher Yudke (Judah), disputed the very notion of a "Jewish history" arguing sardonically that Diaspora Jews had never had a history of their own in the Diaspora; they had been the subjects of the actions undertaken by others and thus Jewish fate was not in their hands. Therefore, in the Land of Israel there was nothing worthy of being taught about Jewish history

which consisted only of suffering, expulsions and pogroms. Such an abnormal history was uninteresting for children who had been born free in the Land of Israel. “It would be far better to let them play freely, outside in the schoolyard,” he argued. So, the children had been endowed with a totally new Hebrew identity and a free spirit and other positive, healthy attributes.

It was easier, almost self-evident, that Zionist pioneers – the champions of the figure of a New Hebrew who sought redemption through a return to the soil of the Land of Israel, would prefer to identify themselves with two local figures: the first - the *fellah*, the local equivalent of the Eastern European peasant admired for his productive role and roots in the soil; the second - the heroic Bedouin robber, the local version of the Russian Cossack (Even-Zohar, 1981, pp. 167-184). These are the antithesis of the passive Jew and so, admiration of the new figures on a socio-psychological level was, in fact, a form of the anti-Jewish syndrome in which the tormented New Hebrew identifies himself with his gentile tormentor. These new entities had an enormous impact on the formation of those living in the Land of Israel, but they first required the creation of a new legend - the only original myth to be born on Israeli soil.

Diaspora Jews, who settled in the Land of Israel in order to end Jewish wandering, denied the resemblance between them and the despised Wandering Jew, rejecting even a likeness between themselves and their own offspring. Children were deemed to be a new breed, so to speak, a departure anchored in the creation of the myth of *benei* or *yalidei ha'Aretz* (the native sons). Their own children who were born in the Land of Israel were set apart, being labeled *sabras*. The choice of the prickly pear cactus native to Israel or *sabra* as a fitting appellation for this new socio-cultural entity is revealing. It is noteworthy to observe that the name

chosen was a new fruit in the Holy Land. It was not one of the generic fruits mentioned in the Bible – the Seven Fruits so deeply rooted in Jewish religious symbolism and entwined in Jewish ritual and artistic motifs, and thus, perhaps associated with a Diaspora mentality. The *sabra* should be the contra-point to *Tradescantia fluminensis* (Wandering Jew) because it characterizes the New Jew, rooted deeply in the desert and not an easy-to-grow creeping plant whose cuttings are passed along like a rootless wanderer from gardener to gardener. The new Jew identifies himself with a new reality and a new plant. Moreover, the *sabra's* rough exterior and sweet fruit made it an ideal symbol of the robust and healthy New Hebrew whose pure and organic existence crystallized around romantic stereotypes so fashionable in 19th Century Europe. In fact, in his upbringing as a New Hebrew, the *sabra* was mandated to belittle and even despise Diaspora and everything that symbolized it. He was a master of his own destiny – *Adon Haaretz* (Lord of the Land) - filled with high ideals and determination epitomized by Theodore Herzl's simplistic slogan, “If you will it, it will not be a legend.”

As a revolution in the life of the Jewish people, as a rebellion against existence in Diaspora, Zionism was motivated to portray the son of this revolution as a fundamental departure from his parents and grandparents. Thus, the *New Hebrew* or *New Jew*, as fathers sought to name their own sons and daughters, were seen to be completely different both physically and mentally from Jews living in the Diaspora...and the archetype coined by the gentile world – the Eternal Jew. Not only was he rooted in his own homeland, but also the spirituality of the New Hebrew arose from closeness with nature, rather than closeness with the Creator. And unlike the greedy self-serving stereotype of the

Wandering Jew, the New Hebrew was endowed with an altruistic spirit, placing group identity over individual growth where the interests of self and other were synonymous.

Ironically, at this juncture in Jewish history, the Zionist movement, in essence, embraced the despicable description of the Eternal Jew, his features and his qualities, as true reality, in order to then disassociate the New Jew from these very characteristics. In order to distance themselves from the past, *sabras* shunned any physical and emotional relationship with Diaspora Jews until they would change and become people of the Land of Israel. The physical attributes and character of the Diaspora Jew in the eyes of the *sabra* – conceived as a deformed human being, a living body void of honor or beauty with a warped intellect - was as much a caricature as the grotesque figure of the Wandering Jew. The New Hebrews were thought to be an avant-garde of *balutzim* or pioneers who “awaited huge reinforcements of the masses in order to achieve realization of their versions of the future” (Scholem, 1965, p. 249).

Zionist ideology identified the Eternal Jew as either a *talmid bacham*, a Jew who believed completely in the authority of Scriptures and was tied to be the master and keeper of the tradition, or a merchant, i.e. an eternal broker. But, on the other hand, such a persona was free of any tie to the Land of Israel and could fulfill all his religious duties in the Diaspora, perhaps even living a full religious life there. Yet Zionism held that one could not really be a Jew in the authentic sense of the word outside Israel, for being a Jew meant more than respecting the religious rituals. The Wandering Jew’s alter ego, the *sabra* or New Hebrew, had taken upon himself to forge and establish a new form of Jewish life in the land of his forefathers – assuming an active role, that is not only by “taking the Jew out of the Diaspora,

but taking the Diaspora out of the Jew”. The essence of the Zionist movement was “the desire to help to bring the world a better, nobler Jew with fewer of the flaws of the ghetto and more of the virtues of Biblical times” (Jabotinsky, 1980, pp. 332-337).

The malaise of the Diaspora was considered to be like a curse on the Jew keeping him out of touch with reality. The “therapeutic” treatment adopted by Zionism was to forcefully open the eyes of Diaspora Jewry. One should not feel sorry for their miserable state, for self-pity is nothing but prolonging the malady. What was needed was self-emancipation: the Eternal Jew must transform himself and take ownership of his plight and change from a cowardly, morally and spiritually downtrodden individual to a proud son of the *Chosen People*. To do so, the Jew must squarely face different realities, respond realistically and with steadfastness.

The myth of the new rebirth of the *Chosen People* appears to be both a new ideological position as well as an operative program. The Talmudic affirmation that “ever since the destruction of the Temple not a day passes without a curse” (Talmud Babli, 1990, p. 221) was adopted by the Zionist movement as a mirror of reality. The Zionist movement was not merely an answer to the physical and social adversities imposed on Jews, but a remedy to “mend the soul”. It was said that a Return to Zion would restore the *crown of the nation* to its former pristine splendor and the schism in the House of Israel would finally be suppressed. The New Hebrew aspired to return to the Hebrew way of life of ancient days - to the original Judaism of the Bible founded on justice, integrity and ethical conduct.

But, as fate would have it, even in the Land of Israel not all-Jewish immigrants have embraced the Zionist ethos of the *New Jew* as it was set forth in the mutually exclusive dichotomy between negative Eternal Jew and

positive New Hebrew. Many have remained steadfast in their traditional traits, character, habits, moral attitudes and general world outlook. Patently refusing to adopt a wholesale rejection of Diaspora life and lifestyle dictated by Zionism dogma as “abnormal”, they viewed redemption of the Diaspora in terms of redemption or freedom from its heritage of suffering – emotional, social and intellectual. Thus, the majority of the Jews who immigrated to the Holy Land have not undergone the metamorphosis Zionism sought to bring about, i.e. a nation who seeks and is able to create an all-embracing national culture from the foundations up, independent of its Diaspora past and a remedy for the soul.

To this day, the yardstick of New Jew ideology remains vibrant, espoused by countless secular Israelis whose outlook has been forged within the Zionist crucible; those who have not espoused Zionist ideology are viewed as despicable, perceived to be lacking vision, dignity, enlightenment or a sense of mission and living an unworthy life. To the eyes of the Zionist’s, and despite the hegemony of secular Israeli society, the normative lifestyles of certain communities in Israel, the ultra-orthodox segment of the population in particular, are viewed as an unwelcome, even menacing manifestation of what Zionist dogma labeled “the decadence of the Diaspora” – supposedly the upshot of mass immigration without 40 years in the desert. The existence and even the spreading of such enclaves of dissident behavior who patently refuse to forsake their Diaspora mentality have not provoked any reexamination of orthodox Zionist dogma. Masking their disappointment, the same optimism that sustained the Prophet Moses – that a new generation “that knew not Pharaoh” would spring forth - has been adopted by modern-day Zionist ideologists who assume that a future

generation will forsake its Diaspora mentality and join the ranks of New Hebrew entity.

The eminent Hebrew poet Uri Zwi Greenberg epitomized and gave voice to these “Anti-Diaspora undercurrents” when he empowered the coming Messiah with new “tools”: The Messiah seems to look like the Eternal Jew but was armed with a sword and flew like an eagle. In Greenberg’s epic poem, *Beoznei Yeled Esaper, (I will speak unto the ears of a child)* (Greenberg, 1991) the *Messiah* arrived in the Land of Israel as a new immigrant, disembarking in the port of Jaffa. His return to the Land of Israel was meant to bring about a full redemption from Diaspora and he arrived filled with great expectations from the people in the Holy Land who should have a direct relationship with the Infinite, the source of holiness.

Unfortunately, the Jewish People did not immediately adapt to the Land of Israel, nor did Jews in Israel turn the entire content of their lives into a function of life in their own land. Issues such as personal choice of lifestyle, including a normal (i.e. bourgeois) lifestyle is no longer viewed as a core element for national existence. It seems that the Wandering Jew, who settled in the Holy Land, could not possibly have absorbed all the divine and spiritual forces that cascaded upon him from heaven. On the other hand, the New Hebrew was, ironically, metamorphosed into the new man of faith and a believer in miracles. This was epitomized in David Ben-Gurion’s comment that “in the reality of the Land of Israel, to believe in miracles *is* reality...”

The Revival of the Eternal Jew in the Land of Israel

The ongoing struggle against the Diaspora was perceived by the Zionist movement as a permanent task, as an essential element in the preservation of the nation and part of an ongoing Zionist revolution in Jewish life, with which the younger generation in the Land of Israel should grow up. Yet, only a small percentage of the Jews who settled in the Land of Israel accepted the ideology of a New Hebrew People and even fewer identified and followed it as a personal creed. In fact, many opposed such cultural indoctrination outwardly. Uri Zwi Greenberg claimed that if the *Messiah* did not reveal himself, it was because of the lamentable existence of large enclaves of passive citizens, peddlers, merchants and middlemen among the immigrants who were enslaved by a narrow mentality of the bourgeoisie who was dominated by the concern for private property.

Thus, in his poem, *I Will Speak Unto the Ears of a Child*. Uri Zwi Greenberg paints the conduct of the Jewish middle class in the Holy Land as a life of depravity that has prevented the coming of the Messiah to Mount Moriah and the dawn of a new era in Hebrew history. Greenberg explains to the untainted *sabra*-child how the *Messiah* came and subsequently departed due to the hegemony of Diaspora merchant culture he encountered. The object of his lament, a *sabra*-tot, was not accidental: only a child born in the Land of Israel has a chance to start a new life in the new-old Land, to understand and identify himself with the essence of the Zionist revolution.

“Hebrew boy, in my house in disgraced Zion.
Evening. Twilight. I converse- and you are on my knees.

Go, beloved, I’ll unfold the tale of the good Messiah
that did not come.

To those older than you I will not tell, beloved. The
elders do not have such eyes and such passion as is in
thine eyes.

.....
He did not come, the Messiah...like an eagle he soars
above the blood-chasms.

Both day and night I heard the flapping of his wings.
Up to the beach of Jaffa he came in the figure of a
man with a sack upon his shoulder: meek and wretched
possessing with a vision and a sword—

And I recognized him later on I’m the ploughman
who sauntered under the scorching sun in the furrow.
And in the quarrymen shattering Jerusalem flint
He was so close... he was *here*.

.....
But to *Mount Moriah* he did not ascend: that is the
only mount upon which his feet he did not step.

He only reached the entrance, just to the threshold
of the kingdom- and there the peddlers found him: in
blazing glory as the moth and around his skull a halo,
And in his hand the key of flame to the gates of the
temple,

Like the Messiah’s rule,
And he was received there... in mockery and in
denial of their Hebrew tongue—

The Peddlers!

What did they say to him then- I have heard what
they spoke:

You are wrong, wanderer. In every generation there
is one who is wrong, who sees false vision: the Kingdom
of Jerusalem...ha-ha.

And in every generation, here we stand upon the
threshold to teach wisdom to the various seers:

Jerusalem needs a rich uncle, a sack full of weighing coins, to build houses with her and to trade, eat and drink.

Without a temple of God on the Mount and without a throne for our King David and without heroes' banners.

Jerusalem needs a golden calf and not a image of Bar-Giora: meek and wretched, possessing but a vision and a stone...

.....

As it came to pass they have finished their words and then laughed: ha- ha, the Messiah contorted: as if been cut by a knife.

I too have been contorted: as if cut by a knife. As if they had risen upon him with a knife and stabbed him in his heart- and he had jumped with a knife in his heart over their bodies.

But in mockery they stabbed him- therefore they overcame him, *The Peddlers*.

And I have heard him question with his mouth's blood: Where are the generations that have been waiting for my arrival,

Those that have summoned me from Rome, from Titus's Arch to the kingdom's threshold?

And I have heard him conclude: the generations are not with me... woe to me, alas.

And woe to you, my land, on both sides of the Jordan!

And the Messiah digressed and diverted his path- and to where I do not know, I do not know, I the teller,

Maybe he is the jackal that howls here in Canaan's vines...

And maybe he went to solitude in the-most-isolated-of-all-the-world's-forts:

To the fort of Messada... and there he sits unclothed.

.....

Maybe not... maybe it was he who soared in the form of an eagle from the brook of Kidron

And soared, circling a circle upon Mount Moriah and wept.

I saw him circling a circle and I have heard his weeping. *A fowl weeping...* and thus I have said: a weeping fowl, is it not the End of Hope, the circle -of-farewell: the conclusion?

Israel's Messianism... in the form of an eagle parts from Mount Moriah...

And the eagle finished his circling and flies toward the sea.

Flies without the flapping of wings and it shall be so obscure.

Maybe to the City-of-Titus, back to the Arch where he sat:

Once more, a being, invisible, in his shackles for two thousand years and from his head to the depth: into the Hebrew blood-well,

Like the rule of the Messiah- -" (Greenberg, 1991, pp. 44-45)

The rootless Jew - the eternal Wanderer who served as a romantic hero in many romantic poems and novels - became a would-be *Messiah* through his third Return to Zion. However, the old-new *Messiah* needed the help of the native sons, of the offspring of the Zionist revolution endowed with the power to shake off the dregs of the Diaspora. Shutting out the past was a natural starting point for commencing anew. The degradation of Jewish life in the Diaspora could not be exorcised simply by superimposing the ethos of the New Hebrew upon it - an antithesis to mundane petit-bourgeois lifestyle of the New Jews' fathers and grandfathers who endlessly wandered through the Diaspora. Ideological aspirations

alone could not dislodge Diaspora customs among all immigrants to the Land of Israel. Therefore, the resurrection of the Eternal Jew as a serious challenge to the creation of a New Hebrew society and culture was perhaps inevitable.

Greenberg epitomized the deep-seated Zionist belief that national renaissance within the Land of Israel could neither be brought by the Eternal Jew, nor even by the first generation of Zionists pioneers: only the newborn in the Land of Israel could make it possible. In retrospect, the dictate to the Newborn Hebrew to live according to the principles prescribed by the Jewish revolution has not changed the masses in the Land of Israel and has not created a completely different society. The character and the habits of the Eternal Jew seem to be stronger than those of the New Hebrew rebellion. Even the activism, the willingness to struggle until the end, along with the prowess and the military might of the New Hebrew has not been able to overcome the rebellious and anarchist forces inherent in the Eternal Jew as entrenched by two thousands years of Diaspora life.

Faced with these realities, the native sons who have espoused Zionist ideology and adopted the culture of the New Hebrew – the carriers of Israeli secular culture – have ascribed to the image of the *talmidi bachamim's* (ultra-orthodox religious scholar) a degenerate and degraded character and physical abilities very similar to those attributed to the Eternal Jew by gentiles during his life in the Diaspora. In the perceptions of the secular Israeli mainstream, the ultra-orthodox Jew, the son of the Eternal or Wandering Jew, is also believed to possess supernatural destructive power over the normal democratic New Hebrew people and society. This is due to the fact that the religious life of the Jews are filled with superstitions, demons, anxieties and all kinds of unnatural entities and strange dreams. Even in the wake

of the 20th century's extermination of European Jewry and the evacuation from European soil of the majority of the remnants of European Jewry, the Eternal Jew has been remarkably resilient, having reestablished himself and flourishing in the Holy Land.

Members of the New Hebrew Nation harbor deep fears that the reemergence and spread of the culture of the Wandering Jew spell the end of the Zionist revolution. Sensing an ideological vacuum that has developed within mainstream Israeli society with the disintegration of the Zionist mold, ultra-orthodox Jews have launched a series of continuous and rather successful attacks on Zionist premises and symbols, presenting themselves as the bearers of the true Jewish tradition and heritage distorted by the Zionist quest for the reconstruction of this tradition in a modern vein. The anarchistic Eternal Jew is seeking a showdown with the Zionist movement on the issue of reconstruction of Jewish life. These harsh feelings and sense of betrayal have prompted the native sons to declare a social, economic and cultural war against the sons of the Wandering Jew. In this cultural war, the descriptions, the stereotypes and even those physical and behavioral features of ultra-orthodox Jews, are depicted as almost identical to those of the Wandering Jew.

The Timeless Power of Myth

The negative socio-cultural role of the Wandering Jew is not far removed from Gabriel Garcia Marquez's imaginary short story *One Day after Saturday* in his book *No One Writes to the Colonel* (1961, 1971). In this particular story, the birds die, inexplicably at first sight, by smashing into the windows of the houses during an oppressing heat wave. The old priest of that

town discovered that the birds were dying because the Eternal or the Wandering Jew had arrived in town. The citizens believed their old priest to be insane because he had already told them twice before that he had “seen Satan”. In this case, though, they were prepared to accept as “reasonable” the idea that the Eternal Jew was, indeed, the source of their troubles and had brought misfortune to their town. The story concludes with the priest remaining in office and a remarkable growth of the number of the attendance to the church due to the fear of the Wandering Jew.

Ironically, ultra-orthodox Jews, who claim that lack of religiosity from the part of the Jewish is the source of various calamities in the Land of Israel, employ the cynical use of the Myth of the Eternal Jew by the priest at the end of the story in a similar manner. In Marquez’s story, the Wandering Jew was only a vague vision that the old priest had used in order to enhance faith and faithful attendance among his flock. In present realities in the Land of Israel, faith in the Eternity of Judaism is preserved and bolstered by similar cynical means.

Marquez’s magical realism, expanding the categorized reality so as to encompass magic and other extraordinary phenomena in Nature or human experience, is deeply rooted in South-American culture. The journey of the Wandering Jew has a symbolic power which is used by the priest very effectively. Ironically, this is also true in the Land of Israel where ultra-orthodox Jews use similar weaknesses– literal and figurative in Jewish tradition and which could easily be identified within the mythology of the Eternal Jew – trying to prove that every tragedy and misfortune is caused by the godless ideology of the native sons and not by the Eternal Jew. The principles of socio-economic and national anarchism inherent historically in Judaism are alive and prospering today in the Holy Land.

The collective identity of the native sons is still challenged by the anarchic Wandering Jew. Moreover, ultra-orthodox circles residing in the Land of Israel stress their “otherness” – they understand themselves as belong to *Israel Saba* (Israel grandfather, the traditional Israel (i.e. the Jewish People), rather than to the secular “Zionist-contrived” State of Israel. Their thoughts and deeds underscore that they continue the tradition of the Eternal Jew although living in the Land of Israel. Their outlook is that Jews have proved their eternal existence even in recent times of adversity and will continue to wander on the face of the earth as they wait for the true *Messiah*. The eternal existence of the Jew, they hold, is the ultimate proof of the authenticity, vitality and power of traditional Jewish religious culture over that of the New Hebrews and their modern ideologies consider being mere passing phenomena.

The phenomenon of the Wandering Jew continues to maintain its mysterious nature and intimidating power since the dawn of Christianity up to the end of the 20th century. And this despite the attempts to tame or domesticate him in the Land of Israel, to make him a normal person, a normal member of society in a culture that eagerly seeks normalization with its neighbors and the world-at-large, which inevitably seem to fail. The Eternal Jew’s perseverance is impressive, powerful and engaging as ever. Application of systematic reasoning and scientific methods in a hopeless attempt to expose the roots of his vitality are misplaced. The longevity and magic power of the myth of the Wandering Jew over Christians and Jews alike does not yield to a rational explanation.

Very much similar to the way in which the dreamer believes that what he experiences is true, the legend is shaped and propelled forward, empowered more by instinctual forces than by conscious, rational and

genuine beliefs *per se*. Perhaps for these very reasons the most fanciful novel ever written at the end of the 20th century about the Eternal Jew was Stefan Heym's version of the *Wandering Jew* (Heym, 1999).

By adapting the legendary Jew to our time, Stefan Heym seeks to ask the eternal existential questions about good and evil, order and disorder, believers and non-believers, crime and punishment. All these new escapades of the Eternal Jew together with his road companion Lucifer, emerge concurrently in Jerusalem and in Berlin (the later venue serves as the counterpoint to Jerusalem and is perhaps a negative entity.) In this novel, Lucifer is a professor of history at the Hebrew University, while the Eternal Jew is once again a cobbler in the Old City of Jerusalem, as in the time of Jesus. Yet this time, the pairs' impressive *tour de force* is launched with the fall of Lucifer in the time of Eden. The author then leaps to Luther's Reformation, and then lands in the Warsaw's Ghetto, climaxing with the Eternal Jew ultimately setting up house according to his old-new lifestyle in Jerusalem. In the opening of the book, the plot begins when a communist researcher appears and harbors anti-religious ideologies. The communist researcher engages in a debate with Lucifer, mocks him, declaring that actually there is no such entity as the Eternal Jew.

Lucifer and Ahasuerus are created again and again in a series of whimsical new adventures, each of which is a potent mixture of fantasy and indignation, of lofty sermonizing and earthy satire. In this highly original version of the image of the Eternal Jew, the two, Lucifer and Ahasuerus, are chained together for generation after generation until their last battle in the 20th century against the communist regime and its anti-religious ideology. This brilliant and highly imaginative journey of the two through millennia of bigotry, cruelty and

rebellious deeds – a journey set in motion by the crucifixion of Jesus – in the end, witnesses a rebirth in the Holy Land of our day but their adversaries in modern times are located on European soil in Germany, the same country where, according to many scholars, the Legend of the Wandering Jew began. Here the saga of the Wandering Jew completes its full circle, reaching its fitting conclusion. The Wandering Jew returns home via a thousand false paths across the world in order to be recognized by every single nation in the entire world.

The Myth of the Wandering Jew has survived, despite German National Socialists' mass murder and despite communists' oppression and denial, as a non-entity under the scrutiny of liberal forces, and subject to estrangement and rejection from the part of Zion. The social-political anarchism of the Jews is brought about by the knowledge, at the same time ironic and melancholic, that everything passes; that tyrannies, oppressors, modernity will be gone some time, and that the only immutable constant is the pact between the Chosen People and their Almighty God. While still shrouded in mystery, never to be fully fathomed it would seem, the Wandering Jew's indestructible, indeed eternal nature, clearly exposes the dialectical relationship between historic reality and the power of imagination as both a destructive and a constructive force.

To sum up, it is quite evident that the mythical character of the Eternal Jew encodes the system of values of Israeli society. It is deeply rooted in the history of the Jewish people and its Christian counterpart. The myth creates a sense of continuity and contributes to the strengthening of Israeli identity. The revolt against the notion of a New Hebrew – and the continuity and

perpetuity of the Eternal/Wandering Jew permeates the works of post-modern Israeli scholars and artists. Postmodern characterization of Israeli society and its protagonists are grotesque and focused solely on the dreariness of life and the baseness of humanity. In many books, poems, plays, as well as in the media, the postmodern Israeli encounters the endless wandering, degradation of every national and traditional symbol or dream (including the Jewish ones), a desire for something better in life which, for the protagonists, can be attained only by the deprivation of the other. All these are continuous mental and moral qualities of these Israeli heroes. In essence, immigrants to Israel who came with their own cultural “Diaspora baggage” are humiliated two times: once in the absorption process into Israeli society, a crucible that involves humiliation by its nature, and again in the portrayal of this process and its product in which these pseudonym heroes arrive to a state of pure nihilism, void of any ennobling qualities.

The Israeli characters – both immigrants and native – are locked in a battle of reciprocal humiliation between being cast in the role of the victim or the role of the victimizer. Human nature is fueled only by blind base physiological needs. This essentially absurd and grotesque existence of Post-Zionist heroes is anchored not only in everyday Israeli reality, but also apparently in acceptance and adoption of the myth of the Eternal or Wandering Jew as a portrayal of reality. Sustaining the myth and confronting it makes it possible for researchers to understand better its real virtues for Israeli society.

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