

The Wound and the Hope: Primo Levi's Troubled Relationship with Israel

In the memory of oppression, oppression outlives itself. The scar does the work of the wound. [...] Injustice retains the power to distort long after it has ceased to be real. It is a posthumous victory for the oppressors, when pain becomes a tradition.

Leon Wieselter, "Scar Tissue," cited in Peter Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life* 281

1. Introduction

Primo Levi has undoubtedly been the principal chronicler and interpreter of the Holocaust in Italy.¹ Thanks to his penetrating testimony, he progressively became the prominent figure of the Italian Jewry, recognized worldwide for the quality of his books and his admirable moral poise. His position in Holocaust scholarship and discourse is so central that the American historian Peter Novick, while discussing the Holocaust in collective memory, was led to wonder: "What would talk of the Holocaust be like in America if a skeptical rationalist like Primo Levi, rather than a religious mystic like Wiesel, had been its principal interpreter?" (351n19). Novick's question may be unanswerable, but the significance of Levi as a writer and a witness has been largely and profitably explored. This is probably the reason for the growing amount of works that approach Levi from a more theoretical angle, exploring his place in debates on the human-animal divide, (post)humanism, translation, identity, the role of intellectuals, etc.² The present essay fits within this trend, with the objective of analysing and elaborating on a relatively underexplored aspect of Levi's Jewish identity: his complex attitude toward the question of Palestine/Israel and his troubled relationship with the State of Israel and the Zionist ideology.³ Starting from Levi's writings and interviews on the subject, and looking at the most accurate biographical accounts, I will investigate a number of issues related to Jewish history and the geopolitical tensions in the Middle East, and how these issues influenced Levi's self-perception as a Jew in contemporary Italy. How did Levi come to terms with what the historian Enzo Traverso has called "the end of the Jewish modernity"?⁴ How did he react to the fading out of that tradition which, between the Enlightenment and the Second World War, saw

the European Jews playing a central role in the critical consciousness of the Western world? How did he understand the historical role of Zionism and the impact it had on both Jews and non-Jews? What was his opinion of Israel? Did he ever acknowledge the Nakba?⁵ What kind of positions did he take as a Jew, as a survivor, and as a writer during the 1967 Six-Day War and during the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon? Finally, how did his views on the subject feed back into the Italian Jewish community and Italy at large?

To address these thorny questions, I will trace the chronological trajectory of Levi's troubled and passionate relationship with Israel. This will enable us to discuss the different phases of his Jewish identity, his discovery of other forms of Jewish culture, and how his views on Israel evolved in response to the political events in the Middle East. Following this itinerary will also help us to ask whether the Shoah and the history of the Jewish Diaspora might usefully contribute to an understanding of other forms of suffering and thus foster ethical approaches based on tolerance and mutual recognition.⁶ My investigation is therefore shaped by the same two principles that move Judith Butler's reflections in *Parting Ways: Jewishness and the Critique of Zionism*. The first, twofold principle is "to distinguish firmly enough between (a) the need to remember and oppose any form of historical revisionism that would consign to oblivion the destruction and forcible displacement of any people (a task that assumes a crucial connection between memory and critical opposition) and (b) the absolute need to reject all instrumentalizations of historical traumas, such as the Shoah, for the purposes of legitimating an illegitimate regime" (200). The second principle is to debunk the equation between Jewishness and Zionism, and to examine the latter from both the standpoint of the victims of anti-Semitism, and from the standpoints of the Palestinians and the Arab-Jews (the Mizrahim).⁷

In order to follow these two principles, I will adopt a method of reading that Edward Said has called "contrapuntal." This notion, which Said derives from classical music, alludes to a way of analyzing novels, cultural identities, and political conflicts that does not reduce the polyphony of such phenomena to homophony, but rather attempts to think through and interpret together their inherent complexity and system of relations.

As we look back at the cultural archive, we begin to reread it not univocally but *contrapuntally*, with a simultaneous awareness both of the metropolitan history that is narrated and of those other histories against which (and together with which) the dominating discourse acts. In the counterpoint of Western classical music, various themes play off one another, with only a provisional privilege being given to any particular one; yet in the resulting polyphony there is concert and order, an organised interplay that derives from the themes, not from a rigorous

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melodic or formal principle outside the work. In the same way, I believe, we can read and interpret English novels, for example, whose engagement (usually suppressed for the most part) with the West Indies or India, say, is shaped and perhaps even determined by the specific history of colonization, resistance, and finally native nationalism. At this point alternative or new narratives emerge, and they become institutionalized or discursively stable entities. (*Culture and Imperialism* 59-60)

By approaching Levi contrapuntally we should be able to consider, for example, how a novel like *Se non ora, quando?* might be read and interpreted by a Holocaust survivor and by a Palestinian refugee, and to hold together their dissonant views in a disciplined whole that does not vanish one perspective into the other. This will also enable us to examine the “worldliness” of Levi’s sporadic writings on Israel,⁸ the way in which they are enmeshed in and contaminated by specific cultural, political, and global circumstances which have shaped their formation and their public, historically situated, reception. Indeed, my contention is that Levi’s preoccupation with the orientation and fate of the State of Israel, and its repercussions on world Jewry, can be best understood if located at the intersection of the interrelated spheres of Turin (and Levi’s local circle of influences), Auschwitz (and Holocaust commemoration), and the Diaspora (the alternative “center” of Judaism).⁹

2. *Before Auschwitz*

Although Levi had often claimed to “[have been] turned a Jew by others” (*Conversazioni e interviste* 269)¹⁰ and that until the publication of the 1938 Racial Laws his Jewish identity was an “almost negligible but curious fact” (*Opere: Il sistema periodico* 1: 770),¹¹ recent scholarship has shown that he excessively downplayed the relevance of Jewish culture in his formative years.¹² Growing up in an integrated Jewish family living in the Turinese neighbourhood Crocetta, he was immersed in an environment where several Jewish traditions and rituals were commonly observed. At the age of thirteen he had his Bar Mitzvah, which was preceded by two years of religious preparation and basic Hebrew and Jewish history classes. Most importantly for our discussion, during the last years of Liceo and during his university degree he sympathized with a socialist, somewhat idealised, strand of cultural Zionism. As he declared in a 1976 interview with the Holocaust survivor Edith Bruck,

BELLIN

Negli anni 1935-40 ero stato affascinato dalla propaganda sionista, mi sembrava ammirevole il paese che descrivevano e il futuro che prospettavano, il ritorno alla terra, la restaurazione di una società fondata sull'uguaglianza e la fraternità, la rigenerazione per mezzo del lavoro manuale, il rifiuto della proprietà come fondamento dell'esistenza. Più tardi, nel corso della seconda guerra mondiale, avevo accettato la necessità di una patria per gli ebrei di tutti i paesi minacciati dall'occupazione nazista. Devo però ammettere che a partire dal 1950 questa immagine s'è andata gradualmente appannando. (*Conversazioni e interviste* 270-71)

Mussolini's anti-Semitic laws were a serious blow for the Italian Jews, who after the Risorgimento had been among the most loyal and politically engaged citizens of the Kingdom of Italy (Sarfatti 3-27). Levi was no exception, and the new measures compelled him to reflect on and come to terms with his alleged "impurity." Around the time when Anna Maria, Levi's sister, was expelled from her state school, Primo started to follow the steps of his Jewish classmates and friends who were attending cultural meetings at Turin's newly established Jewish school.¹³ There, Levi became acquainted with Ennio and Emanuele Artom, two brilliant young brothers who were giving lectures on the Bible and on Jewish history, thereby prompting the members of the Jewish group to discuss and investigate their own identity. As Ian Thomson reports, during this period Levi read Theodor Herzl's *The Jewish State* and joined a Zionist youth group on a winter bargain holiday in the Dolomites (101-102). These experiences fostered Levi's early fascination with Zionism, which nonetheless remained purely abstract and intellectual. To be sure, in 1938 Levi's father and his two brothers had bought a property in Brazil, but the Levis were firmly rooted in Italy, and would consider migrating to Brazil or Palestine only under extreme circumstances.

3. Fossoli, Auschwitz, and the Return

After a brief and unfortunate partisan experience, on or about 20 January 1944 Levi arrived at the transit camp of Fossoli, near Carpi. There he started to discover the immense diversity of Jews persecuted by the Nazi and their collaborators. The novelty and emotional impact of this discovery is evident from the first pages of *Se questo è un uomo*, where he offers a memorable portrait of a North African Sephardic family.

Nella baracca 6 A abitava il vecchio Gattegno, con la moglie e i molti figli e i nipoti e i generi e le nuore operose. Tutti gli uomini erano falegnami; venivano da Tripoli, attraverso molti e lunghi viaggi, e

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sempre avevano portato con sé gli strumenti del mestiere, e la batteria da cucina, e le fisarmoniche e il violino per suonare e ballare dopo la giornata di lavoro, perché erano gente lieta e pia. Le loro donne furono le prime fra tutte a sbrigare i preparativi per il viaggio, silenziose e rapide, affinché avanzasse tempo per il lutto; e quando tutto fu pronto, le focacce cotte, i fagotti legati, allora si scalarono, si sciolsero i capelli, e disposero al suolo le candele funebri, e le accesero secondo il costume dei padri, e sedettero a terra a cerchio per la lamentazione, e tutta la notte pregarono e piansero. Noi sostammo numerosi davanti alla loro porta, e ci discese nell'anima, nuovo per noi, il dolore antico del popolo che non ha terra, il dolore senza speranza dell'esodo ogni secolo rinnovato. (*Opere* 1: 9-10)

The painful reality of the “people that has no land” and the encounter with other forms of Judaism will lead Levi, in later years, to rethink and revisit the Jewish question. It is significant, however, that this age-old plight was “new” for Levi and the other Italian Jews, who hadn’t had any direct experience of statelessness. Only in the “metropolis” of Auschwitz will Levi discover that, as Hannah Arendt has shown, “the deprivation of a place in the world which makes opinions significant and actions effective” is the first step towards a total deprivation of human rights and a systematic “demolition” of humanity (*The Origins of Totalitarianism* 296). Among the *Heimatlose* of Auschwitz III (or Buna-Monowitz), where Levi was interned, there were Jews deported from every corner of Europe. In this universe he met many Eastern European Jews, which he will celebrate in the poem *Ostjuden* and in the novel *Se non ora, quando?* But only after his liberation, in the vast plains of Poland and Russia, Levi had the time and respite to ponder over the significance of this encounter. To most Ashkenazi Jews, the Italian Jews, bourgeois and substantially integrated in their country of origin, represented a “comic oddity,” something regarded with a mixture of spite and perplexity. The cultural difference between the two groups is encapsulated in a telling episode of *La tregua*. During an overnight stop at the station of Proskurov, Levi and three Italian companions meet two Russian Jewish girls, who bluntly tell them “*Ihr sprecht keyn Jiddish; ihr seyd ja keyne Jiden!*” (“You do not speak Yiddish; so you cannot be Jews!”) (*Opere* 1: 302).¹⁴ This broken attempt at cross-cultural communication will remain a thorn in the flesh for Levi, who in the early 1980s will immerse himself in Yiddish grammars and Eastern European Jewish culture to reconstruct and mediate the lost world of *Ostjudentum* for his (largely Western) readers. Another meaningful encounter that will inform *Se non ora, quando?* and Levi’s image of Israel is related in the last chapter of *La tregua*. A determined group of young Zionists heading for Palestine joins Levi’s train shortly before its

entrance into Italy. The description of the band contains some disquieting undertones, an implicit reference to the troubles to come.

In coda al treno viaggiava con noi verso l'Italia un vagone nuovo, stipato di giovani ebrei, ragazzi e ragazze, provenienti da tutti i paesi dell'Europa orientale. Nessuno di loro dimostrava più di vent'anni, ma erano gente estremamente sicura e risoluta: erano giovani sionisti, andavano in Israele, passando dove potevano e aprendosi la strada come potevano. Una nave li attendeva a Bari: il vagone lo avevano acquistato, e per agganciarlo al nostro treno, era stata la cosa più semplice del mondo, non avevano chiesto il permesso a nessuno; l'avevano agganciato e basta. Me ne stupii, ma risero del mio stupore: – Forse che Hitler non è morto? – mi disse il loro capo, dall'intenso sguardo di falco. *Si sentivano immensamente liberi e forti, padroni del mondo e del loro destino.* (*Opere* 1: 393; emphasis added)¹⁵

In *Se questo è un uomo* and *La tregua* the allusions and reflections on the Jewish question necessarily emanate from the suffering of Auschwitz. But the Nazi genocide is understood in universalistic terms, as a radical attack on the human, rather than “simply” as a new chapter in the long history of anti-Semitism. This approach enabled Levi to empathize with other types of suffering, which fueled his internal conflict and split attitude with regard to Israel.

4. *The Six-Day War (1967)*

In her study on anti-Semitism, imperialism, and totalitarianism, Arendt draws a clear connection between the condition of the Jews after the First World War peace treaties and that of the Palestinians after the establishment of the State of Israel.

After the war it turned out that the Jewish question, which was considered the only insoluble one, was indeed solved—namely, by means of a colonised and then conquered territory—but this solved neither the problem of the minorities nor the stateless. On the contrary, like virtually all other events of our century, the solution of the Jewish question merely produced a new category of refugees, the Arabs, thereby increasing the number of the stateless and rightless by another 700,000 to 800,000 people. (*Origins of Totalitarianism* 290)

Having himself experienced a fundamental (if different) deprivation of human rights, having himself been a displaced person after the war, how did

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Levi reframe the Jewish question in the light of the Holocaust and the foundation of the State of Israel? How did he approach the seemingly unsolvable conflict between Arabs and Israelis?

The first documented reaction dates back to 31 May 1967, when Levi addressed Turin's Jewish Community at an event organised in the local synagogue. Preceding the 1967 Arab-Israeli War (5-10 June) by just five days, his talk reflects the tense situation that led to the conflict, and should therefore be understood in that context. The Egyptian President Gamal Abd al-Nasser, faced with domestic problems and political unrest, had bombastically threatened to annihilate Israel. Misguided by false Soviet reports concerning Israel's operations along the Syrian border, he eventually took a risky gamble "in the hope of extracting heavy concessions from the United States as the price of his keeping the peace."¹⁶ On 16 May he ordered his troops into the demilitarised Sinai Peninsula. A few days later his generals occupied the UNEF¹⁷ post at the Straits of Tiran, the closure of which provided Israel with the *casus belli* it needed to launch a war. The escalating frictions between Israel and the neighbouring states accelerated the crisis, and on June 5 Israel launched a series of pre-emptive strikes.¹⁸ Military superiority and the advantage of surprise gave Israel a swift victory, which shocked and humiliated the coalition of Arab states (Egypt, Jordan, and Syria). When the ceasefire was signed Israel had almost quadrupled the territory under its control, which now included the Sinai Peninsula, the Golan Heights, the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, and East Jerusalem. The war had created a mass of refugees and paved the way for the establishment of new Israeli settlements (which violated international law) in the land of Biblical Israel.¹⁹ Israel's crushing victory demonstrated that the apocalyptic narrative of David versus Goliath was largely constructed to serve the expansionist aims of its government, which on 1 June had brought Menachem Begin and Moshe Dayan into the cabinet.²⁰

Addressing Turin's Jewish Community before the outbreak of the war, Levi's talk is clearly influenced by the collective anxiety generated by both Nasser's aggressive rhetoric and the Israeli propaganda, which "repeatedly likened [the Egyptian leader] to Hitler and raised the threat of a second Holocaust" (Pappe, *The Idea of Israel* 175). He starts by confessing that the anxiety he feels "ha radici ormai lontane, in ricordi mai scomparsi di luoghi che non devono più esistere, di esperienze e violenze che speravamo cancellate dalla storia della civiltà; ma a questi ricordi si sovrappongono parole recenti, che anche queste credevamo estinte" (Levi *Opere*: "Più di ogni altro paese Israele dovrà vivere" 1: 1167). He then bemoans the difficulty of maintaining a peaceful and tolerant position, as well as an impartial view on the conflict. He would like "every civilized man" to understand what ties every Jew to Israel:

Mi piacerebbe sapere che tutti vedono Israele così come noi lo vediamo, come un piccolo paese nato dalla persecuzione e dalla strage, a garanzia ed a suggello che non ci saranno più persecuzioni né stragi: come paese socialista, erede di tradizioni antiche e moderne, alla ricerca di un suo difficile equilibrio, ma aperto al dialogo politico, ricettivo per tutte le opinioni, magari anche per quelle che ci ripugnano: come paese creato dal nulla, grazie al lavoro, come “la terra”, la terra per eccellenza, a cui si “sale”²¹ per costruirla e per esserne costruiti: infine come paese del ritorno, unico e insostituibile, come paese della Bibbia, in cui ogni collina, ogni strada ci riporta in ispirito alle generazioni che ci hanno preceduti. (*Opere* 1: 1168)

This passage shows the extent to which Levi, perhaps unwittingly, has bought into the narrative of secular Zionism, a form of messianism which the Israeli historian Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin has summarized in the sarcastic formula “God doesn’t exist, but He promised us this land” (89). Indeed, the *idea* of Israel expressed above contains several characteristic elements of the Zionist discourse. Levi sees Israel as a country created *ex nihilo* (“dal nulla”), as if Palestine had been a barren and unpopulated land before the first *aliyot*. “The small country born out of persecution” is presented in *mythical* terms, which obliterate the geographical and historico-political *reality* of Ottoman and Mandate Palestine. While Israel is seen as safe haven, as a kind of “insurance” against future massacres, the Nakba—the planned, methodical, and bloody expulsion of Palestinians from their land—remains unacknowledged, the unsaid par excellence. Coupled with the idea of a necessary refuge, we find the topos of redemption, of return to the Biblical Land. What is more, Levi, an enduring admirer of the kibbutz movement, associates this spiritual renewal with socialism and the ideal of labour, thereby ignoring the systematic exclusion of Arab workforce, the political and economic exploitation of the Mizrahim, and the fact that most Kibbutznik communities “have been created on stolen lands, that their military function is increasing at the expense of their economic and social function, and that their internal democracy in no guarantee against chauvinism and a brutal certitude that one is always right” (Vidal-Naquet 206-207).²²

After explaining the reasons for his deep attachment to Israel, Levi declares that he has tried to repress this feeling. The central claim of his intervention is that “Israel must live” (*Opere* 1: 1168). This expression of solidarity is legitimate and fully understandable,²³ and it reminds us of the historical trauma that haunts the memory of every Holocaust survivor. Indeed, the point of this article is not to argue against the existence of the

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State of Israel but to explore models of coexistence that would put an end to the exclusionary policies that affirm the sovereignty of a people at the expense of another. This is why I believe it is important to recognize that cloaked under the claim of Israel's right to exist there lie assumptions that precisely undercut or complicate any possible coexistence. In this specific case, the climate of political hysteria promoted by the Arab leaders and the Israeli hawks led Levi to a considerable misperception of the situation.²⁴ He was unable to see that Israel's military power and its alliance with the United States made it a dominant colonial power, not "un paese con le spalle al muro."

Non ci si parli di ritorsione: l'esistenza di Israele può essere scomoda per qualcuno, può nuocere a qualche prestigio, ma non minaccia nessuno; se esiste al mondo un popolo che ha sulla coscienza milioni di tombe; quello non siamo noi. (*Opere* 1: 1168)

Sì, Israele è in stato di alleanza con gli Stati Uniti o, utilizzando appunto una formula rigida, viene definito una pedina dell'imperialismo. Questo è imbarazzante, e non piace a tutti, né in Israele né qui, [...] e purtroppo tende a far dimenticare che Israele è nata viceversa proprio in funzione ant imperialistica, sfruttando e accelerando il difacimento del colonialismo britannico. (*Opere* 1: 1169-70)

What Levi in turn seems to forget is that Israel was born on the ruins of the indigenous Palestinian community, which was, and continues to be, bulldozed into despair. The state founded by David Ben-Gurion on 14 May 1948 does not have a socialist and democratic "constitution" as he claims, but a set of "Basic Laws" that, while establishing a formal democracy, discriminate against the Arab citizens of the "Nation-State of the Jewish People" and deny the refugees' right to return. Moreover, Levi's insistence on the uniqueness and sacredness of Israel plays into the rhetoric of those who use the Holocaust framework to quell dissent on the question of Palestine.²⁵

Tutti devono ricordare che la generazione che ha creato Israele è costituita per intero di scampati al massacro dell'ebraismo d'Europa: questa non è una figura retorica né un'esagerazione, ma è vera alla lettera, uomo per uomo.²⁶ I pionieri del sionismo sono i superstiti dei pogrom zaristi, dei ghetti, delle fosse comuni, dei Lager hitleriani. Per questo, dicevo, Israele non è un paese come gli altri: è un paese verso il quale il mondo intero è debitore, è un paese di testimoni e di martiri; è

anche il paese degli insorti di Varsavia, di Sobibor e di Treblinka. (*Opere* 1: 1169)

In the final part of his address Levi proposes to interpret the history of Israel as an epitome and symbol of the history of humanity. In the brief history of the Jewish state,

vi si ravvisa il *superamento della dispersione*, della discordia, delle sofferenze di lingua, origine, razza, e la loro fusione, prima estenuante, poi facile, *in una convivenza civile*. Vi si ritrova la costruzione di uno stato, e la restituzione di una legge, che è opera di coraggio, intelligenza, fantasia e pietà: in una parola, è opera umana. Vi si ritrova la *conquista del deserto*, la trasformazione della natura da nemica in amica, in cui consiste la più alta vocazione della scienza, e la essenzialità di questa nel destino dell'uomo: ed infatti, non esiste forse paese al mondo in cui il contatto fra l'uomo e gli alberi, sia più intimo e più fruttuoso che in Israele. (*Opere* 1: 1170-71; emphasis added)

Once more, Levi's speech is in tune with the narrative of secular Zionism. Quite surprisingly for a Diaspora Jew, he advances the concepts of "overcoming of dispersal" and, implicitly, of "return to history."²⁷ This return does not take place in a specific socio-cultural context, but is accomplished in a mythical country, a virgin entity fertilized by the highest expression of European civilization and science. Indeed, Palestine is presented as a desert, *terra nullius*, waiting to be brought to life by trailblazers and Sabras²⁸ (Jews born in Israel or the old Palestinian territory), who will plough the land and establish an enlightened Occidental society in the Orient. "The redemption of the land" thus enables the realization of a romantic ideal of purity, as well as an "organic" relationship with nature and a "civilized cohabitation." Such imaginative representation blatantly overlooks the dispossession of Palestinian land (with the related destruction of crops and uprooting of trees), the intentional erasure of Arab archaeological sites and historical heritage, the *ontological* denial of the Palestinian people (encapsulated in Golda Meir's infamous assertion that Palestinians did not exist),²⁹ the question of the refugees, and the systematic discrimination against Palestinian Israelis in the "democratic Jewish State." The last sentence of Levi's speech confirms the extent to which reality has been superseded by a mythical and chimerical vision which obscures the actual situation on the ground.

Al di sopra delle fazioni e del cinico gioco politico, al di sopra del denaro e del petrolio, *la terra di Israele è un'idea*, e le idee sono preziose

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e poche: non debbono e non possono essere soppresse. (*Opere* 1: 1171; emphasis added)

During the 1970s and 1980s Levi, increasingly unhappy with Israel's "hawkishness," would become openly critical of the Israeli government. Yet, the honesty with which he conducted his lifelong struggle against racism and the abuses of memory should not blind us to the fact that *some* of his articles, interviews, and public statements contain, consciously or unconsciously, distinctive Zionist and even orientalist prejudices. The darkest side of the matter is that these prejudices subliminally reintroduce—no doubt against Levi's will—an ideal of nation-state that, as Arendt demonstrated, had progressively excluded the Jews from European society, and an orientalist outlook that, as Said argued, shares many features with modern anti-Semitism.³⁰ The aim of this decentered reading, however, is not to blame Levi after the fact for his myopic solidarity with a dominant power on the eve of a tragic war, but to examine how he moved and acted in the public cultural sphere, voicing discourses that at times contradict and at others fulfil the humanistic values he memorably illustrated in his testimony. With this in mind, in the next section we will analyze the encounter between Levi's "idea of Israel" and the actual reality that he discovered in a brief, albeit revealing, *Itinerary from Turin to Jerusalem*.

5. *The Trip to Israel (1968)*

On 17 March 1968 Levi embarked on a trip to Israel in the company of other "forty Italian ex-partisans, most of them non-Jews, who had been affiliated to the 'Justice and Liberty' Resistance movement" (Thomson 340). During the first days the group visited the coastal town of Acre, Syrian territories occupied by Israel nine months earlier, and a kibbutz by Lake Tiberias.³¹ Then they headed to Jerusalem, passing through areas which bore evident signs of the recent conflict. For their stay in the holy city they chose the Hotel Intercontinental, located in the Arab quarter, where they also met with progressive members of the Israeli government. In the following days the group was escorted by Israeli soldiers through the Negev desert to Gaza and the West Bank. Finally, before returning home, Levi spent some time in Tel Aviv with the Auschwitz survivor Schmul Stern, with whom he discussed the situation of the young Jewish state. The trip left Levi somewhat disillusioned: he was deeply troubled by the status of the refugees and by the militarization of the country.

In the article "Gli incontri nei Kibbutz" (*Opere* 1: 1172-74) Levi begins his account with a confession that further clarifies his previous image of Israel:

BELLIN

Avevo letto e udito molte cose di Israele, fin dal tempo (più di trent'anni fa) in cui i primi "messaggeri" sionisti erano giunti in Italia: me ne ero costruita un'immagine, e di fronte al paese reale l'ho trovata sfuocata e schematica. Pensavo ad Israele come ad un angolo di Europa, anzi di Occidente, incastrato nel mondo orientale: non è così, o è così in misura assai piccola. Israele non è Europa: erede di tutte le correnti di pensiero europee, Israele manca vistosamente di quel sedimento storico che rende una l'Europa da Gibilterra agli Urali, e che costituisce l'ossatura di tutti i suoi aggregati urbani. (*Opere* 1: 1172)

As we saw in the previous paragraph, Levi tended to see Israel as an "oasis" of European civilization grafted into a barren desert. After his trip, he seems to regret the "orientalization" of the country he loves: "Dov'è finito lo spirito sottile, gaio-triste, tormentato, cerebrale, dell'ebraismo medioeuropeo, fermento della civiltà occidentale?" (*Opere* 1: 1173). Yet, he celebrates the pragmatic and enterprising attitude of Israel's "pioneers," the passion with which they discuss every new law, and the civic-minded spirit with which they are building the new state. Their main preoccupation is to lay solid foundations for the future: "la nobiltà e l'anima di Israele hanno due centri, evidenti anche al viaggiatore affrettato, il piantare alberi e l'allevare bambini" (*Opere* 1: 1172). This down-to-earth and hardworking spirit is most evident in the kibbutz communities that, although reduced in number, represent for Levi the very essence of Israel's national project:

Memorabili fra tutti gli incontri nei Kibbutz. [...] Il proposito di informare l'intero paese al modello collettivistico si è rivelato vano, né questo può stupire, ma lo spirito dei primi pionieri, equalitari e tolstoiani, sopravvive incontaminato. [...] Sempre ugualmente meticolosa è la cura con cui si evita l'instaurarsi di una classe dominante, la rotazione delle cariche è rigorosamente rispettata, anche a costo di un minor rendimento del lavoro, la parità di diritti non sopporta eccezioni. (*Opere* 1: 1174)

Se il peso numerico del Kibbutz è ridotto, il peso morale resta altissimo: i lavoratori del Kibbutz sono l'aristocrazia intellettuale, tecnica e spirituale di Israele, sono stimati da tutti e non hanno nemici. (1: 1174)

Notwithstanding the light skepticism and the few critical remarks that appear in his article, Levi remains deluded by the "socialist-humanist" discourse of the Ashkenazi *élite*. What he keeps ignoring is that the façade of egalitarianism masks the *structural* inequalities and apartheid that stain Israeli society. Indeed, his account of the kibbutz leaves out "the facts that

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even before the state of Israel came into being (and of course after), Arabs were never admitted as members, that cheap (Arab or Oriental Jewish) hired labour is essential to kibbutz functioning, that “socialist” kibbutzim were and are established on land confiscated from Arabs” (Said, *The Question of Palestine* 21). If the trip has revealed Levi Israel’s industriousness and dynamism, the lens through which he keeps seeing the country is that of imagination:

Si respira in Kibbutz un’atmosfera severa e serena ad un tempo, di gioia e di impegno. Si respira il microcosmo e l’utopia: ma è un’utopia, forse l’unica che si è realizzata, si nutre di se stessa da ormai molti decenni, ha portato frutto e non ha provocato vittime. (*Opere* 1: 1174; emphasis added)

As the articles examined above show, Levi’s latent orientalism is characterised by a series of fundamental dichotomies: Occident vs. Orient, Europe vs. Middle East, Jews vs. Arabs, reality vs. utopia. This is not to say, however, that Levi was a racist or an uncritical supporter of Israel. On the contrary, between June 1967 and early 1969, Levi and the Turin Jewish leftist cell signed and circulated two manifestos calling for urgent dialogue between Jews and Arabs, condemning the rightward turn of the Israeli government, and (in the latter) even supporting the Palestinian resistance struggle (Sodi 132). How are we to understand, then, Levi’s ambivalent attitude on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict?

Four contextual remarks might help us to gain a more nuanced understanding of Levi’s position. First, Levi’s cultural formation took place entirely under the Fascist regime. Thus, even though his readings and intellectual forays were remarkably broad and diverse, his overall perspective remained very Eurocentric (as he himself points out in *La ricerca delle radici*, among his selected authors one does not find “a rogue, nor a woman, nor anyone from a non-European culture”) (*Opere* 2: 1362-63). Second, perhaps because of Levi’s reservations on Zionism and because of his refusal to portray the Holocaust as the logical endpoint of diasporic life, the reception of his works in Israel has been incredibly slow (*Se questo è un uomo*, for example, was first published in Hebrew in 1988).³² This augmented Levi’s sense of estrangement with Israel towards the end of his life. Third, while considering the “civil war” Levi carried within himself, we should always remember the psychological burden that the Holocaust experience impinged on him and the external pressures he received.³³ Every time he took a public stand on Israel’s military actions he was accused of being either too Zionist or not Zionist enough. Finally, we should also remember that at least until 1967 Israel had the aura of a progressive cause.

Intellectuals like Sartre and de Beauvoir supported the young Jewish state during the first, uncertain years of its existence. This initially provided Levi, whose ideas gravitated on the left side of the Italian political spectrum, with further reasons to sympathize with the notion of a “Jewish homeland.” Taking into consideration these aspects, in the next two paragraphs we will examine how Levi’s tangle of concerns came visibly to the fore in 1982, when the publication of *Se non ora, quando?* was soon followed by the Israeli invasion of Lebanon.

6. *Se non ora, quando?* (1982)

In the early spring of 1980 Levi decided he would write his first fully-fledged novel. Until December 1981, the time he spent researching and writing the book kept his recurring depression at bay. He enjoyed a freedom he could not possibly yearn for while writing his testimonial works: shaping characters, devising a plot, inventing dialogues and scenes. Yet, Levi’s imagination was constrained by the nature of the project: writing a plausible, pseudo-historical account of a band of Eastern European Jewish partisans who group together in the forests and swamplands of the Western Soviet Union and gradually, between 1943 and 1945, fight their own way against the German army and its collaborators to reach Italy, with the aim of migrating to Palestine. The idea of the book stems from a story that Emilio Vita Finzi, a friend of Levi, had told him some years earlier. Just after the war, when he was working at the center for Jewish refugees in Milan, Emilio had met a group of Russian Jews who recounted him their experiences of guerrilla warfare behind the German lines.

As Levi explains in an interview with Philip Roth, there were several motivations that drove him to write *Se non ora, quando?* (*The Voice of Memory* 20-21).³⁴ He wanted to test his own ability to produce a fictional novel; to write a “Western” (in the sense of Western films) full of action, adventures, passions and conflicts, “although projected onto a background of massacre”; to convey some of the cultural richness of the Eastern European *Yiddishkeit* to his Italian readership; and to rehabilitate his unsuccessful partisan experience by recasting it in another setting. Encompassing all these dimensions, there is the theme of human dignity, the will “to pay homage to those Jews who, in desperate conditions, had found the courage and the skills to resist” (21). Indeed, by reconstructing the partisans’ tales, Levi countered the prejudice that Jews, like the bourgeois vacationers of Appelfeld’s *Badenheim 1939*, had gone to their deaths “like sheep to the slaughter.”

Although the book soon became a best-seller and won prestigious prizes in Italy, many critics, particularly in the United States, consider it one of Levi’s weakest works.³⁵ What is more, when in June 1982 Israel invaded

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Lebanon Levi found himself in a rather uncomfortable position. All of a sudden, the Jewish fighters of *Se non ora, quando?* had turned into what seemed to many as the new oppressors, led by the hawks Ariel Sharon and Menachem Begin. Levi received letters from readers who perceived the novel as an endorsement of Begin's militant Zionism.

But can Levi be held accountable for this misinterpretation? What is the actual discourse of the novel? Is there any relation between *Se non ora, quando?* and Levi's views on Israel and Zionism?

As Mirna Cicioni has argued, the novel is best understood as a discourse of Jewish identity and as a respectful tribute to the remote and lost culture of *Ostjudentum*. However, it would be a mistake to completely write off Zionism from the narrative. Most critics, following Levi's own comments on the subject, hold that Levi has never been a Zionist. Yet, as I have argued throughout this article, Levi's position is more complex, and he was quite unaware of how many of his ideas chimed with secular Zionism. Thus, while reading his novel we should avoid, on the one hand, taking the characters as direct emissaries of Levi's thought and, on the other, cancelling *any* intentionality from the text. Indeed, my contention is that, as far as the foundation of Israel and Zionism are concerned, *Se non ora, quando?* epitomizes Levi's ambivalent attitude on the matter. In what follows I will not provide an exhaustive analysis of the text, but rather discuss whether and how Levi's views on Israel and Zionism have evolved over the years and, in the second place, which elements might be derived from the novel to cross the ideological divide that inflames the conflict over Palestine.

The Jewish band is composed of a variety of individuals who represent the cultural, political, and ethnic diversity of *Ostjudentum*. Most of them are Russian; three are survivors of destroyed *shtetlach*; one is a rabbi's widow; one is a Georgian Jew; one is a socialist Zionist feminist; and one is the token non-Jew through which Jewish history and culture are mediated to the reader. The group is led by Gedaleh, a Russian-Polish partisan who plays the violin. Other significant members are Mendel, a watchmaker from Strelka, whose wife ended up in an *Einsatzgruppe* pit and who plays the role of Levi's alter ego in the novel, and Line, who was formally educated in the principles of Zionism and who reveals Levi's ambiguous representation of women. All the members of the band are Zionist, but of different trends:

I componenti si proclamavano sionisti, ma di tendenze svariate, con tutte le sfumature che si possono inserire fra il nazionalismo ebraico, l'ortodossia marxista, l'ortodossia religiosa, l'egualitarismo anarchico e il ritorno tolstoiano alla terra, che ti redimerà se tu la redimi. (*Opere 2*: 340)

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Nevertheless, their ultimate goal and motivations are the same: “Vogliamo andare in Palestina; in Europa per noi non c’è più posto. La guerra contro gli ebrei, Hitler l’ha vinta, e anche i suoi allievi hanno fatto un buon lavoro” (*Opere* 2: 414-15). Having lost all their possessions, the partisans want to find a new “homeland” where to build a new life and “make the desert bloom.” Their project, however, is shrouded in uncertainty. Only a few members of the group seem aware of what they might find in Palestine.

– E se qualcuno cercherà di fermare noi? – chiese Line.
– È questo, il punto, – disse Gedale, – nessuno può dire quando e come finirà la guerra, ma potrà darsi che le armi ci serviranno ancora. Potrà darsi che questa banda, e le altre bande simili alla nostra, debbano continuare a fare la guerra quando tutto il mondo sarà in pace. Per questo Dio ci ha distinti fra tutti i popoli, come dicono i nostri rabbini. (*Opere* 2: 406-407)

The novel significantly ends in Italy, before the band sails to Palestine. Mendel, who supposedly voices Levi’s position, is visibly wary about the future: “Dalla terra promessa non gli veniva alcun richiamo, forse anche laggiù avrebbe dovuto camminare e combattere. Bene, è il mio destino, lo accetto, ma non mi scalda il cuore” (*Opere* 2: 482). Thus, while exposing the condition of loss and uprootedness that urged many Jews to migrate to Palestine, the novel presents Zionism as both a necessity and a doubtful hope.

È da vedere se avevano ragione i sionisti di Kiev e di Kharkov, che predicavano che gli ebrei stanno bene solo in Terra d’Israele, e che dovrebbero partire dall’Italia, dalla Russia, dall’India e dalla Cina e radunarsi tutti laggiù, a coltivare gli aranci, a imparare l’ebraico e a ballare la Hora tutti in cerchio. (*Opere* 2: 254)

If the portrayal of the band’s Zionist project is cast in a shadowy light, *Se non ora, quando?* also harbours a set of values and experiences that can be usefully linked to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. For there are ethical and historical affiliations *to be made* between the Jewish and Palestinian experiences, but these can only be made if we think about the socio-political conditions represented in the novel with a simultaneous awareness of the genocide against which they are set *and* of the subsequent catastrophe to which they are connected (Said, *End of the Peace Process* 209).

The first of these affiliations concerns the experience of dispossession. Almost all the members of Gedaleh’s band have lost their homes and have been forcibly displaced from their villages.

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Le loro case non c'erano più: erano state spazzate via, incendiate dalla guerra o dalla strage, insanguinate da squadre di cacciatori d'uomini; case-tomba, a cui era meglio non pensare, case di cenere. Perché vivere ancora, perché combattere? Per quale casa, per quale patria, per quale avvenire? (Levi, *Opere* 2: 319)

Dov'è la mia casa? È in nessun luogo. È nello zaino che mi porto dietro, è nel Heinkel abbattuto, è a Novoselki, è nel campo di Turov e in quello di Edek, è di là dal mare, nel paese delle fiabe, dove scorre il latte e il miele. Uno entra in una casa e appende gli abiti e i ricordi; dove appendi i tuoi ricordi, Mendel figlio di Nachman? (2: 441)

Not only Levi links the memories, traumas, and hopes of the fighters to the condition of statelessness and alienation, he also prompts the reader to establish an ethical relation with the victims of forced exile. In a discussion with the mayor of a Polish village, Gedaleh asks: "Che cosa faresti tu, sindaco, se ti trovassi solo, a mille chilometri dal tuo paese, e sapessi che il tuo paese, e i campi, e la famiglia, non esistono più? (*Opere* 2: 390)." Another connection can be made at the level of anti-Semitism (for according to the Aryan myth both Jews and Arabs were "Semites"). Dispersed in a hostile territory, the Jewish fighters are frequently discriminated by the Gentiles they encounter. The stereotypes through which they are perceived are indeed inextricably bound to the exclusionary practices that perpetuate their ordeal. Finally, by presenting acts of revenge, betrayals, and a summary execution of a partisan, the novel questions "simple models" of history and invites us to judge each actor with moral and historical precision. Indeed, its narrative contains both a critique of unnecessary violence (the killing of ten Germans for the murder of a member of the band) and a strong argument for the right of self-defence against an oppressive force.

As this cursory survey suggests, the history of the Jews during the Second World War and the Palestinian catastrophe are organically connected and must be considered together in order to overcome reciprocal denials and unilateral perspectives. This is not to draw facile and preposterous comparisons between Israel and the Nazis, but to show that Jews and Palestinians share experiences of suffering that, notwithstanding their historical specificity, contain common traits which must be mutually "worked through" to progress towards a political solution based on reciprocal understanding and equal civil rights.

7. *The Lebanon War (1982) and its Aftermath*

On 3 June 1982 the Abu Nidal terrorist organization shot and seriously wounded Shlomo Argov, the Israeli ambassador in London. Using this assassination attempt as a pretext, on 6 June the Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin (enticed by Sharon) launched “Operation Peace for Galilee,” attacking Lebanon by air, land, and sea. The declared objective of the invasion was to expel the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) from southern Lebanon, to stop the PLO’s attacks into northern Israel, and to create a “security zone” north of Israel’s border. In reality, the belligerent Likud government wanted to destroy the PLO “state within a state” infrastructure in Beirut, drive out the Syrian forces, and install a compliant pro-Israeli government in Lebanon with Bashir Gemayel (the head of the Christian Phalange party) as president. Historians estimate that over 18,000 Lebanese, Palestinians and Syrians and 675 Israeli soldiers were killed during the conflict.³⁶ As news of atrocities reached the media, Israeli society became increasingly divided and many Jews and non-Jews from all over the world criticized the disastrous invasion and heavy bombings of Lebanon. The darkest moment was reached in mid-September, when Lebanese Christian Phalangists entered the Palestinian refugee camps of Sabra and Shatila and, under the light of flares provided by the surrounding Israeli army, massacred thousands of unarmed Palestinians, including women and children.

Levi’s reaction to the war was outspoken and clear. Together with other distinguished Jewish personalities he prepared and signed an open letter to *La Repubblica*. Published on 16 June 1982 with the title “Perché Israele si ritiri,” the letter called for the withdrawal of Israeli troops and the recognition of “the right to self-determination of the Palestinian people” as a means of finding a peaceful solution to the conflict and “fighting the potential seeds of a new anti-Semitism” (cited in Anassimov 346-47). Due to a strange coincidence, Levi learnt about the debate sparked by the letter and the escalation of the war while he was in Auschwitz: having already signed the letter, on 14 June he had flown to Poland with a group from Florence to visit the camp where he had been imprisoned. The Lebanon War and the harrowing memories of the camp thus overlapped, putting Levi in a state of great distress. How did he respond to this difficult situation? How did he interpret his public responsibility as a Jew and as a survivor as the invasion became increasingly devastating? And what impact did the events in Lebanon have on his image of Israel?

As Judith Butler argues in “Primo Levi for the Present,” “Levi understood the Holocaust to provide a moral framework for his own criticism of Israel, and he would not listen to those who said that, in his position, he

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ought to remain silent” (202). Yet, Levi’s article “Chi ha coraggio a Gerusalemme?” and the interviews that he gave between 1982 and 1986 also show that, while critical of Israel’s military *démessure* and political exploitation of the Holocaust, his position remained profoundly affected by the dialectic of trauma and hope that shaped his ambiguous and idealized image of Israel. I would therefore like to suggest that, notwithstanding its honesty and moral integrity, Levi’s discourse needs to be radically revised. His criticism of Israel should be taken, in my view, as a courageous and yet *insufficient* attempt to overcome the “militarisation of suffering” (Rose, *The Question of Zion* 129) that characterizes political Zionism—an attempt that can be read as a first step in the process of mutual acknowledgement and historical atonement that constitutes the precondition for a negotiated settlement between Jews and Palestinians.

Shortly after his return to Auschwitz, Levi published in *La Stampa* an urgent article entitled “Chi ha coraggio a Gerusalemme?” (*Opere* 2: 1171-72) The article presents an impersonal narrative of the events that led to what Levi describes as a “not unmotivated” but excessively violent invasion of Lebanon.

Non stupisce che l’eccidio hitleriano abbia rinsaldato i legami fra gli scampati, facendone potenzialmente una nazione, ed abbia conferito loro la portentosa volontà con cui in pochi anni vinsero i Paesi arabi coalizzati e l’ostilità inglese, costruendo miracolosamente un nuovo Stato. *La terribile violenza subita legittimava in certa misura la violenza esercitata*: infatti, Israele venne subito riconosciuta da tutte le grandi potenze, prime fra tutte l’Unione Sovietica e Paesi del blocco orientale. In Israele si sono riconosciuti ed identificati, in maggiore o minore misura, gli ebrei della diaspora: era il Paese della Bibbia, l’erede di tutti i filoni della cultura ebraica, la terra redentrica, la patria ideale di tutti gli ebrei. (*Opere* 2: 1171; emphasis added)

As in the case of the 1967 war, while describing himself as “non-Zionist,” Levi presents the establishment of the State of Israel in terms of “redemption” and partially legitimizes the violence of 1948 on the basis of violence visited on the Jews during the Holocaust. No heed is paid to the basic facts that the Palestinians played no role in the Nazi genocide and that a sacred text cannot be summoned up to justify the seizure of another people’s land.³⁷

Levi then moves on to discuss the background of the invasion. It is quite evident that his dovish argument rests upon a number of sweeping generalizations about the “Arab world” and the Orient:

I decenni che sono seguiti hanno eroso e distorto questa immagine. Il mondo arabo, più volte sconfitto sul campo, ha accumulato verso Israele un odio intenso, ravvisando nel nuovo Stato il colpevole dei suoi mali secolari, irrigidendosi nella posizione di rifiuto; Israele, sempre meno Terra Santa, sempre più Paese militare, va acquistando comportamenti degli altri Paesi del Medio Oriente, il loro radicalismo, la loro sfiducia nella trattativa. (*Opere* 2: 1171)

In this article Levi does not criticize the invasion in itself, but the excessive use of force deployed by the Begin government. Moderate, humane, liberal, his position prefigures in many ways the contradictions of the so-called Israeli “peace camp”: seemingly well-intentioned, but unwilling to dare to deal with 1948 and its legacy, with the Zionist exclusionary policies and mechanisms of denial, with the colonialist and orientalist ideas embedded in the socialist-pastoral utopia of the kibbutz movement, and with the anti-Semitic pedigree of Zionism, manifest in Herzl’s writings and in Israel’s adoption of European nationalist ideology.

Israel, however, represents also a “wound” (*lacerazione*) for Levi, an emotional link that in the last part of his life grew increasingly cold. Indeed, in all the interviews that followed the Israeli invasion Levi revealed his grief for Israel’s descent into militarism (Poli and Calcagno 292-305). This distancing reached its peak after the Sabra and Shatila massacres, when Levi signed a second petition demanding a peaceful resolution of the conflict and joined a demonstration outside the Israeli embassy. Then, on 24 September, *La Repubblica* published an interview with Gianpaolo Pansa carrying the title “Io, Primo Levi, chiedo le dimissioni di Begin” (*Conversazioni e interviste* 295-303).³⁸ In the discussion Levi expresses a deep concern for the way in which the war was “polluting” the image of the Jews throughout the world and fomenting a new wave of anti-Semitism. In line with his cultural perspective, he laments the fact that “Israel is turning into a Middle Eastern country” and wills it to “rediscover its European roots, the balance of its founding fathers, Ben Gurion, Golda Meir” (302). However, when the reporter asks him about the letters of protest he received from Israel, he rejects the instrumentalization of the Holocaust as a way of justifying Israel’s aggression:

[M]i dà dolore [il sangue ebreo versato] come qualsiasi altro sangue versato da altri uomini. Ma sono ugualmente lettere strazianti. E io ne sono straziato, anche perché so benissimo che Israele è stato fondato da gente come me, ma meno fortunata di me. Uomini con il numero di Auschwitz tatuato sul braccio, senza casa e senza patria, scampati agli orrori della seconda guerra mondiale, che hanno trovato laggiù una casa

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e una patria. So tutto questo. Ma so pure che questo è l'argomento preferito di Begin. E io a un tale argomento nego validità. (*Conversazioni e interviste* 302)

After the polemics generated by these declarations, Levi studiously avoided getting involved in any debate on Israel. This silence lasted until September 1984, when he conceded an interview with Gad Lerner to be published in *L'Espresso* (*Conversazione e interviste* 304-11).³⁹ This interview adds a new dimension to Levi's then customary critique of the PLO and the Israeli government. When asked by Lerner whether Israel can be seen as today's centre of gravity of Judaism, he replies:

No, ci ho meditato a lungo: il baricentro è nella Diaspora, torna a essere nella Diaspora. Io, ebreo diasporico, molto più italiano che ebreo, preferirei che il baricentro dell'ebraismo rimanesse fuori d'Israele. (*Conversazione e interviste* 308)

The recent events led him to consider that "the best of Jewish culture is bound to the fact of being dispersed, polycentric" (*Conversazione e interviste* 308). For "[t]he history of the Diaspora has been a history of persecution but also of interethnic exchange and relations, in other words a school for tolerance" (310). He then concludes by calling all Diaspora Jews to fight against the degradation of political life in Israel, prompting them to try to steer the Israeli government towards a more open and tolerant position.

8. Conclusion

In all its ambivalence, Levi's troubled relationship with Israel exemplifies how in much of the Western world Israel is not only a state but also, and perhaps foremost, a field of ideological, transcendental, and redemptive struggle. In spite of his self-proclaimed secularism and unwavering ethical commitment, Levi has often been caught in the discursive contest that continues to displace, ignore, and oppress the actuality called Palestine. Underlying this contest is the dialectic of trauma and hope, whereby the wound of the Holocaust turned into the cut of a sword, thus producing further wounds and damage on both sides of the barricade.⁴⁰ If Levi partially escaped this destiny it is because he eventually understood that love of Israel and criticism of Israel are not incompatible, and that Jews and Palestinians "cannot coexist as two communities of detached and uncommunicatingly separate suffering" (Said, "Bases for Coexistence" 207). But the shortcomings of his trajectory bid us to examine the structure of Zionism from a strictly historical point of view and to acknowledge the extent to

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which Orientalism has shaped our approach to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Both of these tasks have already been egregiously fulfilled by critics like Edward Said, Ella Shohat, Jaqueline Rose, Judith Butler, and Idith Zertal, to whose work this essay is immeasurably indebted. But a considerable part of the scholarly discourse on Levi has still to take stock of their critical insights, for—as far as the deep implications of Levi’s politics and ethics are concerned—it largely remains anchored to hagiographic and descriptive forms of analysis. This essay is therefore an attempt to move towards more theorized, worldly, and comparative ways of reading Levi and the conflict in the Middle East, with a contrapuntal awareness of “the memory of the offence” and of what scrapes for life on the other side of the wall.

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ENDNOTES

¹ See the chapter “Primo Levi,” in Gordon, *The Holocaust in Italian Culture, 1944-2010* (64-85).

² See, for example, Druker; Insana; and Ross.

³ On Israel, the Holocaust, and Zionism, see Zertal, *Israel’s Holocaust*, and Pappe, *The Idea of Israel*.

⁴ In *La fin de la modernité juive*, Traverso identifies Jewish modernity with the period that stretches from the Enlightenment to the Second World War. During this period, most Jews had an outward orientation and were the main source of critical thinking and political dissent within the West. But the Holocaust and its aftermath have brought this trajectory to an end. By analyzing the demographic, cultural, and political shifts of world Jewry, Traverso argues that Jews now find themselves, thanks to a paradoxical reversal, at the heart of the Western apparatus of domination. Two of the consequences of this *general* tendency are the rise of Israeli nationalism and the institutionalization of Holocaust memory as “civil religion” in Western liberal democracies.

⁵ The Nakba, also known as the Palestinian catastrophe, refers to the expulsion and flight of more than 700,000 Palestinian Arabs from their villages and towns during the intercommunal clashes of 1947-8. The exodus was caused by a series of causes, most importantly the planned attacks perpetrated by the Zionist militia (*Haganah*) and the panicked fear that spread among the Arab population.

⁶ Cf. Butler, “Primo Levi for the Present,” in *Parting Ways* (181-204).

⁷ For an examination of Zionism from these alternative standpoints, see “Zionism from the Standpoint of Its Victims,” in Said, *The Question of Palestine*, and Shohat, “Sephardim in Israel.”

⁸ For a discussion of the concept of “worldliness,” see Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (31-53).

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⁹ On the intersection between these spheres see Sodi.

¹⁰ Cf. Levi, “Ebreo fino a un certo punto,” interview with Edith Bruck (1976).

¹¹ See also “Itinerario d’uno scrittore ebreo,” in *Pagine sparse 1981-1987* (*Opere* 2: 1213-29).

¹² See Harrowitz; and Lang, “The Jewish Question,” in *Primo Levi: the Matter of a Life* (91-111).

¹³ See Thomson, *Primo Levi* (91-109), and Angier, *The Double Bond* (116-34).

¹⁴ See also Cicioni, *Primo Levi* (48-49, 112-13). This scornful attitude was literally echoed by the Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir, who once said “Those who do not speak Yiddish, are not Jews.” Cited in Shohat (8).

¹⁵ On the role of Italy as a central staging ground for the Jewish clandestine immigration campaign in the years 1945-48, see “Italy: Between Europe and Palestine,” in Zertal, *From Catastrophe to Power* (17-51).

¹⁶ CIA cable cited in Bickerton, *The Arab Israeli Conflict* (113).

¹⁷ The United Nations Emergency Force, whose mission was to provide a peacekeeping buffer zone between Israel and Egypt.

¹⁸ See Bickerton (106-30), and Pappe, *A History of Modern Palestine* (185-93).

¹⁹ The Israeli leaders referred to the occupied West Bank as “Judea and Samaria.”

²⁰ As Zertal writes, “In most of the events that preceded the war, it is generally acknowledged that Israel played the active part” (*Israel’s Holocaust* 115).

²¹ The verb “salire” here is a clear reference to the Hebrew term “*aliyah*” (plural “*aliyot*”), literally “going up, ascent,” used with religious and ideological connotations to denote the immigration of Jews to Eretz Israel.

²² On the Zionist “conquest of labour” and on the myth of Israel’s “egalitarianism,” see Said, *The Question of Palestine* (21-24), Shohat (13-23), and Raz-Krakotzkin (114-16).

²³ While legitimate, the claim of Israel’s “right to exist” should not override the question of *which* Israel has a right to exist, i.e. within which borders, intending which territories, and under which conditions (the State of Israel being a country with no unequivocally defined borders and which often works to blur and stretch its own borders).

²⁴ On the construction of the threat of annihilation in the case of the 1967 War, see Zertal (*Israel’s Holocaust* 115-27). Levi was so terrorized by this unlikely prospect that he raised money for Israel at his company (SIVA) and was photographed for *La Stampa* donating blood. See Thomson (332).

²⁵ See “A Bill Submitted for Sufferings Rendered,” in Novick (146-69); and “The Charge of Anti-Semitism: Jews, Israel, and the Risks of Public Critique,” in Butler (*Precarious Life* 101-27).

²⁶ a distorting statement: as Raz-Krakotzkin shows (33-37), the founding principle of Zionism is that of return (*shiva*). After the failure of the Uganda project, Zionist leaders have exploited the Jewish people’s necessity of a safe haven in order to disguise the colonial nature of their enterprise

²⁷ On the concepts of “negation of exile” and “return to history,” see Raz-Krakotzkin (26-102).

²⁸ The term “Sabra” is normally used to refer to a Jewish person born in Israel or in the territory of old mandate Palestine.

²⁹ Cf. Golda Meir quoted in Gelvin, *The Israel-Palestine Conflict* (92).

³⁰ See Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, and “Zionism Reconsidered”; and Said, *Orientalism*. On the Zionist adoption of anti-Semitic epistemology and on how Israel’s racist system of rule is reminiscent of the conditions of European Jews living under anti-Semitic discriminatory laws, see also Massad, *The Persistence of the Palestinian Question* (166-78).

³¹ See Thomson (340-42), and Sodi (131-32).

³² See Roubach and Wardi.

³³ As he told Stefano Jesurum in 1982, “Il mio rapporto con quella terra non è un rapporto qualunque. Per cause emotive e personali. Quello è uno stato fondato da chi era con me in Lager. Un paese di commilitoni, di compagni, di persone care. Materialmente saranno anche solo venti su tre milioni, ma quei venti erano prima ad Auschwitz con me, e dopo hanno trovato una loro patria, una loro terra. Le dirò, è per me un pensiero raccapricciante l’idea che Israele un giorno possa essere spazzato via, annientato” (Jesurum 100).

³⁴ Cf. Levi, “A Man Saved by his Skills,” interview with Philip Roth (1986).

³⁵ See Cicioni, *Primo Levi* (48-49, 119-30), and “Levi’s Western”; Luzzato (309-15); and Angier (616-30).

³⁶ See Bickerton (148-57); Pappé, *A History of Modern Palestine* (221-24); and Said, *The Politics of Dispossession* (69-100, 247-72).

³⁷ See also Levi’s remarks in Camon, *Conversazione con Primo Levi*: “[Lo stato di Israele] avrebbe dovuto essere una zattera di salvataggio, il santuario a cui avrebbero potuto accorrere gli ebrei minacciati negli altri paesi. L’idea dei padri fondatori era questa, ed era antecedente alla tragedia nazista: la tragedia nazista l’ha moltiplicata per mille. Non poteva più mancare quel paese della salvezza. Che ci fossero gli arabi in quel paese, non ci pensava nessuno. *Per la verità ce n’erano molto pochi*. Ed era considerato *un fatto trascurabile* di fronte a questa gigantesca *vis a tergo*, che spingeva gli ebrei da tutta Europa” (59-60; emphasis added).

³⁸ Interview with Gianpaolo Pansa (1982).

³⁹ The interview was entitled “Se questo è uno Stato.”

⁴⁰ Cf. Rose, *The Question of Zion* (146); see also *The Last Resistance*.

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