

THE WANDERING JEW — A JEWISH PERSPECTIVE

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It is well known that the Wandering Jew as a cultural phenomenon was never a Jewish invention. On the contrary: this figure was created in an anti-Jewish spirit.¹

From 1602 onwards German chapbooks (Volksbücher) spread the news about Ahasver, the Cobbler of Jerusalem, who was cursed by Jesus Christ, because Ahasver did not allow him to rest at his house as he, Jesus, carried the cross. As a result Ahasver was said to appear all over Europe; conveniently at the houses of people related to the originator of the German Reformation. The story usually included a prophecy according to which the curse will be lifted at the Second Coming of Jesus.

This story has been translated into many European languages, it has crossed the generic borders of the chapbook to become a proverb, a folksong, a novel, epic poetry, lyrical poetry, drama, etc.

Jewish culture never accepted the legend of the Wandering Jew as historical information. However, within the distribution area of the legend, Jews have frequently used the figure of the Wandering Jew, although not in its narrative form or in a referential mode, but rather symbolically and allegorically. The image or symbol of the Wandering Jew appears in Jewish culture, both geographically and chronologically, in conjunction with emancipatory tendencies. It converges with the conscious Jewish acceptance of the values and the culture of the host countries, as can be seen especially in the case of Germany. The adaptation of the Wandering Jew image is therefore the concrete product of a change in point of view - that is, the non-Jewish view of the Jew was adopted by the Jews themselves.

There are several ideological and psychological interpretations of the Wandering Jew legend in its Christian form which interpret it generally as a symbol of the *other*. In Jungian terms it is identified as a Shadow figure² or in

Christian theological terms as the Antichrist or in literary historical terms as Cain or the Sacred Executioner.⁴ This projective nature of the figure can explain the negative characterization of Ahasver's physical appearance as well as his total isolation from human (i.e. Christian) society. This otherness is also utilized for purposes of moral education in order to encourage generosity and hospitality.

In a quite recent essay on the Wandering Jew, the French-Italian-Jewish poet Edouard Roditi turns this last aspect upside down by deducing from it the idea that Jews may be manipulative and deceptive: "Given this historical background [i.e. the emergence of a vagrant caste of Jewish beggars in Central Europe] it is not difficult to conclude that more than one unfortunate Polish Jew must have been tempted from time to time to exploit the credulity of some gullible Gentile by claiming to be that legendary Wandering Jew who would be granted the hospitality denied all other Jews."⁵ This selective hospitality of course bears witness to a certain double standard in the moral education itself: the fact that the Wandering Jew is a penitent Jew who actually has embraced Christianity and accepted Jesus Christ makes him worthy of human kindness. This seems to be the primary function of the Christian legend of Ahasver: to clarify that Jews will be treated as human beings only if and when they convert to Christianity. This tendency can also be found in some 19th century texts of seemingly historical or philological character which actually serve as propaganda for the baptism of the Jews. Some of these texts were written by baptized Jews, some by Christian theologians.⁶ The French writer Reville concludes such a communication metaphorically, by stating that "The Wandering Jew is dead after having become reconciled with Christ."

The same metaphor of the death or the burial of the Wandering Jew may be found in a quite different context in the treatise on the Jewish question by Karl Kautsky (1914), a follower of Karl Marx. In this work Kautsky garbs his internationalistic and ideal solution for the Jewish problem in the image of the Wandering Jew brought to a final rest, by the end of Jewish national existence. From a somewhat similar ideological point of departure the Soviet Jewish writer Ilya Ehrnburg denied being a Wandering Jew, as he had been called by the editor of the French newspaper "Liberation". Ehrnburg admitted that he was a traveller, but he also said that he possessed "a country, a garden, roses". The columnist of the Israeli daily "Davar" who reported Ehrnburg's views commented that many Jewish writers [in Exile] had thought this, but that it seemed strange that anybody in the second half of the 20th century should still think so.⁷

In East-German Jewish writer Stefan Heym's full length novel *Ahasver*, the main point seems to be the existence of a three dimensional Ahasver - mythical, in the age of Creation, legendary, from the Reformation period, and existential, modern. All these characters embody the paradigmatic spirit of change and revolution. The threefold time-scheme stresses the repetitious, eternal aspect of the figure.

Already in the first half of the last century the figure of Ahasver was considered by some Jewish intellectuals an unsuitable subject for Jewish literature. Ludwig Philippson did not approve of the theme since it represented a negative picture of the Jew as a sinner and a sufferer.⁸ In Philippson's opinion the emancipatory tendencies should have broken the association between Ahasver and the Jew in the common mind and especially in the Jews' own self-image. The same feeling must have guided the German scholar who in a recent volume devoted to Moses Mendelssohn's thought, depicts Mendelssohn as a positive "Gegenbild" opposing the traditional picture of the Wandering Jew - a better ideal to strive for than Ahasver.⁹ But in 1901, S. Lublinski still considered Robert Jaffe's *Ahasver* (1900) a very important book for anyone who wanted to understand the Jewish question.¹⁰ The protagonist of the book is a Jew who disillusioned by social democratic ideals seeks to replace them with the ideals of "Deutschtum". Ahasver is used as a strictly metaphorical title for the book. Between Philippson's and Lublinski's opinions lie 60 years in which political and historical anti-Semitism had developed and been expressed in numerous publications. The illusion of a possible eradication of the image of the Jew as Ahasver in the 1840s was replaced by a self-ironical Ahasver image in which the Jews' own cultural identity is actually given up in favour of "Deutschtum".¹⁰

The image of Ahasver plays a part in the complicated game of identities - the other in others and the other within oneself is embodied in the Wandering Jew. Thus the Hebrew poet U.Z. Grinberg projected the sufferings of Jesus onto the Jews by using the Wandering Jew figure.^{10a} In a very different text, an anonymous Yiddish song quoted and translated by Y.T. Lewinsky, the Wandering Jew is a nickname given by the Gentiles to the Jews in order to push them back to the ghetto (very much like the process described by Roditi in his aforementioned essay).¹¹

The Wandering Jew seems to have haunted the imagination of Yom Tow Lewinski, collector and scholar, and the editor of *Yeda-ajjn*, a popular-folkloristic journal. Already in 1926 he published in Antwerpen a Hebrew article about the Belgian legends of the Wandering Jew.¹² Lewinsky collected literally every scrap of paper on which any reference or allusion to

the Wandering Jew appeared. His materials include sources which were unknown to G.K. Anderson when he finished his monumental work.¹³ Much of the Jewish material mentioned in this paper is from Lewinsky's collections.

The Russian Jewish poet Nikolai Minski published in 1900 a poem where he compares his own fate, his expulsion from Russia, to that of the Wandering Jew.¹⁴ This is an unusually personal use of the image within the general scope of its various occurrences. Usually we may contend that the values attributed to the Wandering Jew by Jewish writers correspond to their own main ideological commitment. Thus the Chief Rabbi of Belgium Armand Bloch, in 1901, expressed a view of the Jews as distributors of universal fraternity and since that ideal has not yet been achieved, the Wandering Jew still had to wander.¹⁵ Gottlober's poem from 1887 equated the Wandering Jew and the rational teaching of Judaism,^{15a}

The Wandering Jew also became a symbol for national and cultural revival. This view was hinted at by Graetz, in an oral communication for British Jews.¹⁶ The Zionist transformation of the Wandering Jew consists of one specific idiom, *viz.* - "coming home".¹⁶

Although, as Lewinsky stated, the figure of the Wandering Jew was never integrated in Judaism, still writers like Buki ben Jogli, Shimon Frug and others used it.

Abramsky's survey of the Wandering Jew often refers to an earlier more detailed account of Baruchowitz in Ha-Dor of 1901,¹⁷ a straight description of the literary occurrences of the image which lacks almost totally any interpretation or evaluation of the subject itself. For Abramsky, however, the real heroes, the real Wandering Jews were the cantonists, the Jews who waited patiently, not those who were in a Messianic rush. And this notwithstanding Abramsky's uncompromisingly Zionist views.

But as Dubnow has brilliantly pointed out the legend also bears a strange historical connection to Sabbatian Messianic expectations. This connection again has inspired Jakob Wasserman in writing his *In the Days of Shabtai Tsvi* in which the character of the Wandering Jew is influenced by one of the pre-reformation precursors of the figure, i.e. Elijah, who proclaims the beginning of Messianic age. The connection between the Wandering Jew and catastrophes is true to the nature of the figure in European folk belief which associates Ahasver's appearance in a certain locality with wars, plagues and ultimately with the Last Judgement and the Second Coming.

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Jewish interpretation has in a number of cases returned the Wandering Jew to approximately the same "mythical" era in which the Christian legend made him appear. In an article by Alexandrov¹⁸ and later on in the Yiddish drama *The Eternal Jew* by Pinski the Wandering Jew was understood to be the person who looks for the Messias Menachem who according to Midrash Lam. R. Ch. I. was born in Bet-Lehem (Buber's version) or in Birat-Arava (printed version) and later disappeared.

This interpretation is in clear conflict with the numerous rejections of the Wandering Jew from the inner Jewish tradition - and attributes to it a Jewish genesis, which is obviously speculative. This association, however points to a significant ideological trend - the messianic-redemptive integration of Zionism. The Wandering Jew, a Christian eschatological motif, lends itself to Jewish eschatology. This same ideological background led Harold Fisch in a recent essay¹⁹ once again to reject the Wandering Jew in favor of Elijah as an authentic symbol of renewal vs. the goal-less repetition, symbolized by Ahasver. The above mentioned Pinski drama which was played by *Habima* in the early twenties, was understood by a contemporary critic to echo a dynamic view, one would like to say a dialectic view of the relationship between national revival and universal values - a dialectic view which according to him was not resolved or simplified by the artistic achievements of the actors and the director.²⁰

A pictorial image of the homecoming of the Wandering Jew may be seen in a photograph taken by Ben-David at Bezalel School of Arts in Jerusalem: in the photograph Achad Ha-Am and Boris Schatz stand in front of the Polish Jewish painter Hirschenberg's large painting the Wandering Jew. The painting itself underwent some wanderings before it ended up in Jerusalem.²¹

Many writers and scholars have connected the Wandering Jew to Jewish sources by associating it with the Jewish ideal of a wandering Baal-Teshuva or the Kabbalists being exiled time and again with the Shekhina.²²

The correlation between the Wandering Jew and Lutheranism has often been pointed out and it is already established in the details of the Volksbuch version which supply a Lutheran environment of priests and scholars for the events.²³

The historical, almost causal, relationship between Gutenberg's invention and the Reformation, followed by widely distributed vernacular translations of the Bible, has been well established in scholarship. A 19th century baptized Jew (Paulus Cassell) mentions this connection on the Eternal Jew.

He wrote that "The invention of the art of printing and the Reformation were the two great valves through which the hearts of the European peoples breathed out."²⁴

The Wandering Jew was created as a fictitious figure after the Reformation, in conjunction with the popularization of printed communication. In the Ahasver book there is an emphasis on verisimilitude, on precise dates and loci of the event, on well-known persons (such as Paulus von Eitzen, a fellow student of Luther at Melancthon's school; the Lutheran ambassadors to Madrid etc.) and on exact descriptions of the main figure Ahasverus. What we actually find in this material are the stylistic roots of journalistic reportage. The mode of distribution precursors modern journalism as well. Neurbaur's detailed bibliographies in which editions the chapbooks among other materials on the subject are enumerated, reveal an amazing picture of the mass-production and mass-distribution of this particular chapbook (equaled only by the earlier Faust-buch).²⁵ The speed of the distribution is also noteworthy, and as I have mentioned in my article on the Finnish tradition of the Wandering Jew, in all Scandinavian countries the "news" about the Wandering Jew preceded the actual settling of Jews in those countries.²⁶ The journalistic aspect of the material is further enhanced by the fact that local editions in different countries supply fresh news about the appearance of the Wandering Jew in that country (e.g. in the market of Värnamo in Sweden). These editions also include dramatic news from distant countries such as the Libyan war mentioned in a Finnish chapbook.

The wanderings of the Eternal Jew accomplish diachronically what mass media in our age attain synchronically - i.e. the creation of a "global village". The Wandering Jew is the carrier of the Good Tidings that Jesus died on the cross to save mankind, and he, the faithful reporter has indeed seen it with his own eyes.

Incidentally, the cyclical nature of the appearance of the Wandering Jew is explicitly stated in many versions; this is the fulfillment of the redemptive prophecy of the Second Coming which will not be accomplished before the Wandering Jew has been in every single place on earth, thereby connecting the whole world in one communicative network.

Also worthy of mentioning is the fact that the first printed book itself, namely the Bible, is in Western Christian culture perceived as the Jewish heritage of Christianity. The name of one of the pre-Reformation precursors of the Wandering Jew figure, Cartophilus, has been interpreted in correlation with Augustine's phrase about the Jews as the "preservers of books" for Christianity for which the term is cartophylax.²⁷

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The Wandering Jew is a multivalent sign in Jewish culture. In every instance of its use it seems to be a sign for a number of unresolved oppositions between centre and periphery, between history and redemption, nationhood and universality. Or as Paul Mendes-Flohr in his article on the 19th century *déclassé* Jewish intellectuals quotes Simmel's definition of the Stranger: "The Unity of nearness and remoteness".²⁸ The presence of these unresolved oppositions charge the Wandering Jew figure with its rich symbolical connotations, since symbolical meaning is derived from complex, often oppositional semantic configurations. The Wandering Jew is a perambulating stranger who carries European cognitive universe everywhere. He is more specifically the carrier of that intimate mythical cognizance which is sacred to Christian society. He therefore embodies the fear for Jew and Christian alike that the stranger may indeed possess a knowledge of one's own primordial symbols, which oneself may not even have direct access to.

Motes

1. G.K. Anderson, The Legend of the Wandering Jew, Providence 1965, is the most extensive single monograph on the subject. G. Hasan-Rokem and A. Dundes (eds.), The Wandering Jew - Essays in the Interpretation of a Christian Legend, Bloomington, Ind., 1986, displays a sample of the attempts to interpret the legend of the Wandering Jew from various points of view.
2. S. Hurwitz, "Ahasver, The Eternal Wanderer: Psychological Aspects", in: Hasan-Rokem & Dundes (see n. 1), pp. 211-226.
3. P. Cassel, Ahasverus: Die Sage vom ewigen Juden, Berlin, 1885.
4. H. Maccoby, "The Wandering Jew as Sacred Executioner", in: Hasan-Rokem & Dundes (see n. 1), pp. 236-260.
5. E. Roditi, "Wandering Jews", Commentary, August 1979, p.56.
6. Cassel (see n. 3); J. Reville, La légende du Juif Errant [n.p.; n.d.], p. 243; O. Procksch, Altes Testament und Judentum, Leipzig, 1921.
7. In the column "Be-shulei Dvarim" in Davar, daily, May 19th, 1963.
8. The column "Literarische Nachrichten", Allgemeine Zeitung des Judenthums IV, 1840, pp. 444-462. I thank Dr. Ita Shedletzky for showing me the essay and for providing the identification of the author as Ludwig Philipson, the editor of the journal.
9. J. Braecker, "Moses Mendelssohn, ein Gegenbild des Ewigen Juden", Ich handle mit Vernunft... Moses Mendelssohn und die europäische Aufklärung! hrsg. W. Hincke, Hamburg 1981, pp. 15-44. I thank Prof. Shmuel Werses for the reference.

10. S. Lublinski, "Ein juedischer Roman", Ost und West 1, 1901.
For this reference too I thank Dr. Ita Shedletzky.
- 10a. U.Z. Grinberg, Ha-gavrut Ha-ola, pp. 29-30.
11. From Yom Tov Lewinsky's unpublished materials about the Wandering Jew. I thank the late Dr. Lewinsky's family, his daughters and especially Dr. I. Bar-Tal of the Hebrew University for the permission to use these materials with out restrictions.
12. Y.T. Lewinsky, "ha-yehudi ha-nitshi be-aggadat ha-belgim" [The Eternal Jew in Belgian Legend], Moznaim, 1 December 1926, pp. 10-13; 2 January 1927, pp. 17-20.
13. Anderson (see n. 1).
14. See n. 11. Minski published his poem in Voshod, 6 December 1900.
15. See n. 11. A. Bloch, Le Juif-Errant, Committee de Conferences Juives, Bruxelles, 8 Decembre 1901.
- 15a. See n. 11. A. Gottlober, He-Assif III, 1887, pp. 661-663.
16. This oral communication was paraphrased in Hebrew by Y.S. Fuchs in the journal Ha-Maggid, 31, 1887, pp. 323-325, 331-333. I thank Prof. S. Werses for showing me this source.
17. Y.D. Abramsky, Al Ha-yehudi ha-nitshi [On the Eternal Jew], Jerusalem, 1943; quotes extensively Y.L. Baruchowitz, "Ha-yehudi ha-nitshi ba-aggada uva-poezia" [The Eternal Jew in Legend and Poetry], Ha-Dor I, 1901.
18. Ha-Maggid 44, 1887, p. 349.
19. H. Fisch, "Elijah and the Wandering Jew", Rabbi Joseph Lookstein Memorial Volume, ed. L. Landman, New York, 1980, pp. 125-135.
20. A. Patkin's critique in Rimmon (the fragment in Y.T. Lewinsky's collections lacks date of publication; see n. 11).
21. See n. 11.
22. R. Edelmann, "Ahasverus, the Wandering Jew: Origin and Background", in: Hasan-Rokem & Dundes (see n. 1), pp. 1-10.
23. Roditi (see n. 5).
24. Cassel (see n. 6), p. 47.
25. L. Neubaur, Die Sage vom ewigen Juden, Leipzig, 1893 and numerous complementary studies to the subject between 1893 and 1917. See also A. Schaffer, "The Ahasver-Volksbuch of 1602", in: Hasan-Rokem & Dundes (see n. 1-), pp. 27-35.
26. G. Hasan-Rokem, "The Cobbler of Jerusalem in Finnish Folk lore", in: Hasan-Rokem & Dundes (see n. 1), pp. 119-153.
27. Lewinsky too quotes Augustine in his papers (see n. 11). Cassel refers to the same (see n. 3), p. 38.
28. P. Mendes-Flohr, "The Study of the Jewish Intellectual: Some Methodological Proposals", in F. Malino and R. Albert-Cohen, Essays in Modern Jewish History, London, 1980, p. 152. See also his reference to Kautsky's above-mentioned use of the metaphor of the dying Ahasver in P. Mendes-Flohr, "The Throes of Assimilation: Self-Hatred and the Jewish Revolutionary", European Judaism 12, Spring 1978, p. 38.

Source: Galit Hasan-Rokem, "The Wandering Jew - A Jewish Perspective", *Proceedings of the Ninth World Congress of Jewish Studies*, Division D, Vol. II, Jerusalem 1986, pp. 189-196