"Israel": An Abstract Concept or Concrete Reality in Recent Judeo-Argentinean Narrative?

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The re-democratization process in Argentina, beginning at the end of 1983, emphasized a tendency that had emerged within the Judeo-Argentinean fiction (and Argentinean narrative in general) to contemplate on the collective and personal memory, while creating a type of dialogue with the general historic context of the twentieth century. This process was un-masqueraded as a political and literary strategy in order to re-create an “archive” and re-construct it in a way that would correspond to the new material circumstances of the Argentinean nation and its society at that specific moment.

The dilemma of how to define the essence of Jewish identity from that moment on, what is the relevance of Zionism in this new context, which method would best conserve the languages of origin—Yiddish and Hebrew primarily—and what is the significance of the images of “Land of Promise” and “Lost Paradise” in the new political circumstances, emerged suddenly again and renewed the debate about notions of collective and national belonging in an on-going changing world. “Israel,” interpreted here as a literary element within the novels, had an important part in this discourse, since it seemed to present a few challenges to the collective attempts of building a unified national and collective identity, as I will explain shortly.

In order to examine this point, I propose to analyze some of the biographic
personal stories expressed in three contemporary novels written by Jewish Argentinean authors, who represent, at the same time, two different generations. The discussion of new trends among younger authors who self identify themselves as Jews and Argentineans will assist us in understanding the relation between “Israel,” and other elements of personal and collective identification.

Marcelo Birmajer (1968), a porteño writer, belongs to the new generation of authors from Judeo-Argentinean origin. In his fiction, the theme of Israel appears as a natural and cohesive component of the total Jewish essence expressed by his characters, and is repeated constantly in his various novels. While evaluating Birmajer’s perspective, it is worth asking, how does it differ from other perceptions that emerge from stories such as those told by Ricardo Feierstein and Alicia Dujoyne Ortiz (representatives of the former generation, born in the forties)? Does Birmajer offer a new form to reflect on the individual and collective identity and to dialogue with the elements mentioned above? Before responding to these questions, I wish to discuss some of the historical factors that shaped the image of Israel both within the literary texts and the larger extra-textual surroundings, so that this complicated relation can be better evaluated.

One of the most important Israeli laws constituted after the Holocaust and the establishment of the Jewish state (1948) was the Law of Return (accepted on the fifth of July, 1950), which declared in its first article the right of every Jew in the world to immigrate to the Zionist country and receive immediate citizenship, thus promising a shelter to anyone in trouble. The moral force behind the Law of Return after the European tragedy was condensed to the desire to have an open-door policy that would always facilitate and enable Jewish immigration (aliyah—ascendance to Israel). Furthermore, it expressed the obligation and responsibility on behalf of the state of Israel to assist Jews outside its geographic borders, depending on the circumstances. This force acquired a number of times a conflictive character when confronted with the issue of state sovereignty and its limits.²

In the case of the Jewish community in Argentina and its close relation to Israel, this conflict found its various expressions as well in different occasions throughout past decades. First, it should be noted that from 1948 on—considering the difficulties to achieve sufficient local funds to maintain the collective Jewish life—begins the dependence of the Argentinean Jewish institutions on the Jewish Agency of Israel, a semi-autonomous organization that preceded the formation of the Jewish state, and was in charge of the Jewish settlements in the territories of Palestina-Erezt Israel. Second, while observing the ideological streams of the Judeo-Argentinean education system, stands out the pre-
dominant role since 1948 of Zionism as the main ideology, and that of Hebrew, which replaced Yiddish in Jewish schools, as the language of the Jewish culture. Hence, the different religious, cultural and ethnic expressions of the Jewish-Argentinean social life became a manifestation of different Zionist activities, like the celebration of the Israeli Independence Day or the organization of non-formal Jewish education seminars and youth training in Israel.

I would like to emphasize, though, that the significance of Israel in the formulation of Jewish life in Argentina (as well as in other places) was more than just an internal community affair. It has been related to the way the non-Jewish peers and gentile society perceived and accepted the Jewish members as well (Mirelman 55). The level of acceptance or rejection on behalf of the general society was crucial in different periods, especially when we review the complicated relation that has been established between Israel and the Jewish community of Argentina since 1948. The linguistic confusion between “Israeli” and “israelita” (a member of the people of Israel, hence, a synonym of the term “Jew”) in the Spanish language highlights the problematic character of this dichotomy, and the accusation of “double loyalty,” an argument frequently used by the Argentinean nationalists, demonstrates, along with the next examples, the ambiguous duality of this relation.

This first event I wish to discuss is the Eichmann case. In May of 1960, agents of the Israeli Mossad kidnapped in Buenos Aires the Nazi war criminal, Adolf Eichman, and brought him to trial in Israel. This event generated a new antisemitic reaction in Argentina, and contributed to the portrait of Israel as an imperialist country (Rein, “The Eichman Kidnapping” 101–20). This episode is linked to the Israel policy-makers and the Jewish leadership’s decisions regarding the condition of the Jewish desaparecidos during the “Dirty War” of the seventies. The Israeli diplomats confronted an ambivalent situation, since as formal officials of the state, they had to negotiate with any government in power, considering especially the arms deal between Israel and Argentina during that period, and the delicate bilateral balance recuperated after the Eichmann case. On the other hand, as representatives of the Jewish state, they could not stay indifferent to the suffering of the persecuted fellow Jews. Meanwhile, there were other considerations such as the interference in interior affairs of the community, represented by the DAIA (Delegación de Asociaciones Israelitas Argentinas), which had to be done with high sensibility, especially when it has been related to the assistance offered to its in-danger members.

When finally the military Junta was replaced by a democratic government and the atrocities of the war were discovered, the leaders of the Jewish community and the Israeli representatives were accused of their short of action to
save some of the thousand Jews disappeared or dead. Even if during the “Dirty War” years the Jewish Agency representatives tried in different ways to find, free and assist by providing immigration documents to detained members of the community, being a civil organization (directed by the Israeli government), it was limited in its actions. Reports on torture and antisemitism in the prisons and the clandestine concentration camps were published outside Argentina even prior to 1983, but the reaction of Israel was conditioned by the reasons mentioned above and the desire to conserve good relations with Argentina, especially because of its long lasting neutrality regarding the Israeli-Arab conflict.

The terrorist attacks in Buenos Aires during the decade of the nineties form part of this nexus as well. Both the attack in March of 1992 against the embassy of Israel in Buenos Aires, and the bombing of the AMIA (Asociación Mutual Israelita Argentina) building on the eighteen of July in 1994, were a shocking revelation within the Jewish community and outside it. In both cases, those responsible for the acts of terror were never found. only a few clues linked them to the organization of Hezbollah, Syria, Iran and Lebanon. These events emphasize the complexity of the relation that exists among Israel, Argentina and the other political actors involved. Moreover, it reflects the confusion mentioned previously regarding the ties between the Jewish community of Argentina and the modern state of Israel, and the identification of the Jew as an Israeli “agent” in his country of residence. Israel, in short, represents more than an object of identification and a desired mythological symbol incorporated in the traditional image of the biblical Zion: it becomes part of a complicated, and sometimes antagonist, political reality.

Do the novels, published after the re-democratization, reflect on these circumstances? As Sosnowski once declared: “el escritor israeli judío es probablemente el único para quien la identidad judía no postula una relación adversaria con su Estado” (22) (The Jewish Israeli writer is probably the only one to whom the Jewish identity does not postulate an adversary relation with his country from the start). According to this statement, novels published by Jewish authors outside Israel, meditate on Israel as the only possible place for reconciliation, where the different personal and communal characteristics of religious, national and patriotic issues consolidate without resulting in a major personal crisis of identification.

However, is it still the case? Israel, interpreted here both as an object of desire—myth of origin—and as a second nation incorporated in the image of the modern state of Israel, can it still be described as the only possible place of reconciliation? How do recent social and cultural transformations impact the revision of collective archives and what does the image of Israel represent
within these new perspectives? What does the myth of “Zion” represent for the new generation of Jewish Argentineans and within the collective imaginary? Are the dilemmas of “double identity,” of the sentiment of exile and the assumed marginalization (associated with the Jewish-Argentinean character) still relevant? I wish to study these concerns by analyzing three examples of contemporary Jewish Argentinean fiction.

A general look at a century of Judeo-Argentinean narratives discloses various experiences, condensing the image of Israel into the following representations: for the first and second generation of Jewish-Argentinean authors, the Zionist dream meant a utopia and Zion itself was a symbol of peace and happiness, as Gerchunoff once declared. With the realization of the dream of returning to the holy land, along with the establishment of the state of Israel, new possibilities were opened to express oneself as a Jew and as Argentinean. The motive of Israel represented the modification of the diasporic Jew—wicked, persecuted, submissive—while offering another “recuperated” figure, rooted in his land. This transformative moment appears in different forms in the novels published in the decades that followed. Israel becomes a tangible space, a destiny for immigration for both those who were inspired by the Cuban Revolution and other radical ideologies, and for those who chose to immigrate due to antisemitic and xenophobic remarks, finding the opportunity to express themselves through the decision of aliyah (ascend to Israel) and the idea of “build and re-build” (livnot u-lehibanot). The Six Days War of 1967 only further emphasized this motto with the alternative offered by the unified Jewish state from that moment on to the Jews around the world. Looking back at this historic process, it is worth questioning as for to which extent global changes that re-defined our surrounding as postmodern, multicultural and hybrid, fractured the foundational myth of the melting pot (kur hituch), and eliminated the image of Israel as a revolutionary place of becoming.

The first novel I wish to discuss is La logia del umbral (2001), written by Ricardo Feierestein (Argentina, 1945). This work presents the story of the Schvel family (from Yiddish—threshold), a family of Russian Jews who immigrated to Argentina at the beginning of the twentieth century in order to start a new life at the Jewish colony of Moisesville, a settlement founded by Baron Hirsch. La logia manipulates the image of the threshold as a metaphor of the Jewish existence in Argentina and the sense of living between two homelands: the place dreamt as the “new Zion” and the concrete one that materialized as the current Argentina. This is emphasized by the fact that the novel opens and closes with one horrific moment—the terrorist attack on the building of the AMIA, on the morning of July 18. The text, which begins with the shock and
confusion immediately after the attack, proposes to review the concept of integration by a series of flash-backs to different periods in the family’s lives.

The first chapter titled “Llegada: 18 de julio de 1994” opens with the celebration rally in the streets of Buenos Aires to mark a century of Jewish activism in the agricultural colonies. Mariano Moisés Schvel, fifth generation born in Argentina, riding towards the main Plaza de Mayo, remains trapped under the rubbles of the AMIA building, without ever completing his mission:

[...]

(I have been selected to conclude the relay race of which sense I had captured since the beginning. This adventure started there in the province of Santa Fe, in Moisesville, and I acceded to its esoteric growth only after the long initial preparation. Its main mystery, I realized, was to have none. I will explain: nobody requests from anyone to complete a specific task. The name, the coded slogan, the blinding epiphany—the entrance gate to the “threshold’s association”—lacks symbols, announcements, preventions. [...] And all of a sudden, when horse and rider are about to cross the Tucuman street, the horror explodes. A gigantic noise, an obscene wind’s blow that separates me from the saddle and turns me in the air. Everything turns black, the deafening sound seems to indicate that, with the obscurity of a giant eclipse, the end of the world arrived.)

The attack becomes a moment of destruction not only of the most visible symbol of the Jewish community in Argentina, but that of the myth that saw in this country the new “Land of Promise.”

Furthermore, this drastic moment impulses the revision of the space the Jewish agent occupies within the Argentinian collective memory, returning to the idyllic image presented in the novel of Gerchunoff, Los gauchos judíos (1910). La logia parodies Gerchunoff’s perspective, criticizing its innocent and fictitious representation of Argentina as a successful “melting pot,” an image that does no longer correspond to the concrete reality of violence and hate, ter-
ror and failures. The criticism returns to the symbol of the land of Israel, and examines it from different angles. First, Zion represents a metaphor, an image that does not relate to a certain geographic or political territory. It is the symbol of the virtual space dreamt by the newcomers as a possible home to begin a new way. Hence, it becomes the representation of both the biblical land of Israel and of Argentina, as its modern incarnation.

However, it represents also the tangible space in the shape of an independent state, a possible answer for persecutions, and a new destiny for immigration. Salomé Schvel, for instance, the elder brother, who immigrated to Israel during the dictatorship of the seventies, realizes after a while that it is not Argentina that constitutes his center of personal and collective identification, but Israel, his new place of residency. From his country of origin he conserves his habits, the language and his memories, but his present and future are immersed in the desert city of Beer Sheva.

On the other hand, his cousin Manuel maintains his sentimental ties with Argentina and keeps his faith in the myth of the “melting pot,” conserving the idyllic image of the Jewish gaucho. Nonetheless, recognizing his condition as a pariah Jew, this character accepts his marginalization in order to stay in the frontal zone and announce from there his role as somebody who “made America” as well.

According to this text, the ambiguity can be resolved in three distinctive ways: by immigration, by the closure in the Jewish “ghetto,” or by assimilation. Each alternative offers a different path to meditate on the representation of Israel and its importance for the personal identity. For those who opt for immigration, it presents the possibility to start anew and become part of a fuerza mayor. Argentina, naked from its original splendor, is displaced by the modern state of Israel, which offers a different kind of mestizaje: new and old immigrants from North Africa, Europe and the Middle East, native residents of the city and the kibbutz, dialogue in this space that presumes to represent the kibutz galuiot. For the members of the community who remain shielded within the gates of the “ghetto,” Zion (used in this case as a synonym for the term “Israel”) is an object of desire; always distant and un-reachable. Lastly, the assimilated ones do not seek anymore to find meaning in this metaphor. Israel, for them, is part of a lost past and forgotten history, emerged suddenly in moments of horror, such as the terrorist attacks as a reminder. Despite the fact of being forgotten by the assimilated Jew, Israel is still a symbol of rivalry and conflict to his non-Jewish surroundings, thus, identifying him as a guilty member of this undesired “logia” although he no longer identifies with it.

In the novel El árbol de la Gitana (1997), written by Alicia Dujovne Ortiz
(1945, Argentina), the revision of the foundational myths of the *argentinidad* and the myths of origin of its Jewish community ends at the warm land of the Dead Sea. For the protagonist, whose homonymic identity—Alicia Dujovne Ortiz—proposes to narrate an autobiographical story, the decision to exile to Paris in 1977 after the military *Junta* assumes power, sets off the search after her origin and the reconstruction of her genealogical tree. Tracing her family’s stories on previous experiences of wandering and dislocation, of descendents of Jewish-Russian Immigrants who arrived to the Jewish colonies of Baron Hirsch, Italian merchants who assisted Christopher Columbus on his journey to America, Spanish converts from Toledo, and Portuguese conquerors who landed in Argentina, this novel opens the opportunity to review the collective archive. With the intention of searching the floating root of its individual existence and the origin of the Jewish and Catholic family’s lost branches, it manipulates the voice of the story-teller *la Gitana*, the gypsy lady, symbolic resemblance of her semi-Jewish, semi-Christian family ancestors, to return to the migrant past.

Fate, according to *El árbol*, is an important factor in the displacement experience and the reconstruction of the individual story. It is fate that determines the destiny of each character: the encounter between Christopher Columbus and Micer Nicoló Oderigo, ancestor of the protagonist, representative of Banco di San Giorgio and an ambassador from Genoa; the loss of a letter sent by Oderigo supporting Columbus on his maritime expedition; the sexual encounter between Akiba Dujovne, the Jewish ancestor, with the gypsy lady and the results of this event, planting his seed in her womb; or the trading of lands in the Argentinean pampas, when the Jewish Dujovne arrive to Argentina and buy the land from the hands of Ortiz, another ancestor from the maternal family branches. All these episodes do not appear in the novel as accidental events. The text intentionally narrates them in a certain diagetic order, questioning the notion of memory and affirming the order behind the seemingly arbitrary fragments.

It is fate that emerges from the repetitive encounters along history and through geography, the factor which constitutes the family origins, recuperated slowly through the narration process:

El árbol tomaba forma lentamente. Micer Nicoló Oderigo se había topado con Samuel Dujovne y con Don Pedro de Vera. Giuseppe Oderigo había conocido a Toribio Ortiz. Ricardo Ortiz, el nieto de Toribio, se había casado con Carmen Catalina Oderigo. Y la hija de ambos, Alicia Ortiz Oderigo, se habría de casar con Carlos Dujovne, nacido en las colonias del Barón de Hirsch. (*El árbol* 175)
(The tree was slowly taking shape. Micer Nicoló Oderigo had encountered Sanuel Dujovne and Don Pedro de Vera. Giuseppe Oderigo had met Torbio Ortiz. Ricardo Ortiz, Torbio’s grandson, had married Carmen Catalina Oderigo. And their daughter, Alicia Ortiz Oderigo would eventually marry Carlos Dujovne, born in the colonies of Baron Hirsch.)

The Catholic fathers of the protagonist would later discover that they might be actually descendents of converted Spanish Jews, while the search for the origin of the Jewish family branches would lead to the mysterious medieval pagan kingdom of the Kuzar.

Everyone is looking for a lost patrimony in this text; Columbus and Oderigo search after the lost Cipango, the Jewish ancestor looks for a new land of promise, the protagonist—a piece of land to plant roots after her recent dislocation and exile. The image of Zion, hence, represents, first of all, a quest for belonging and the desire to become part of the archive. When the protagonist finally returns to Buenos Aires to visit her dying mother, she discovers that her peregrination to the sites of the past is just another revision of her memory, since the Buenos Aires she encounters no longer represents the space of communication with the ghosts of history. Thus, both the New York of her exiled friends and the Jerusalem of the congress of Jewish authors, like Bogotá—the city of residence of her proper daughter—allow the protagonist to communicate with others her pain of alienation and dream of other possible lives.

These sites of memory become the center of longing and disillusion, upon the recognition that the present only proposes temporal spaces, Israel among them, to negotiate an identity. From this perspective, the geographic distance from the object of desire (like Zion and the Promised Land) is no longer a trigger of diasporic sentiments, since the past can be reached from any location and can be constructed virtually through the imagination.

The image of Israel as a substantial territory appears only at the end of the novel, with the first visit of the protagonist to this destiny. Touching the warmth of the land of the desert enables a closure: for Dujovne Ortiz, this event represents a desired approach. Crossing the linguistic frontiers (from Spanish to French, from French to Hebrew and back to Spanish) and the national borders (from Argentina to France and back, from Columbia to France, then to the United States and Israel) becomes a necessary act to dialogue with the particular history and to articulate the notion of exile as another artifact in the construction of contemporary identities.

The last encounter with the ghosts of the past occurs in the Dead Sea, when the protagonist self-questions her current way of living: “y al final de
esta historia, ¿qué soy yo sino cascotes y escombros sueltos?” (292) (At the end of this story, what am I if not loose ruins and rubbles?). The recollection of the past, hence, a mission accomplished in Israel and France, consists of the reflection on possible “puntos de fuga” (vanishing points) that would lead from a painful past to an unknown destiny, and that would teach how to survive in the ambiguous surroundings of the present. In this sense, the messianic cabalistic elements like, for example, the acceptance of exile as a “mission” to reunite the dispersed sparks in the world (El árbol 293), are converted into a vehicle to imagine the virtual home constructed slowly through nostalgia.17 A home that might have never existed, could not exist, and yet, it is desired as the true dwelling. The revision of the founding archives from Israel permits also to express in a different mode the sense of being a Jew and Argentinean, integrating the fantastic and the real, the political and the private, in one narrative line, while the roots intermingle and the roads are opened for recreation of the personal and national history.

For the journalist Mossen, the ironic protagonist of Marcelo Birmajer (1966, Argentina), in Los tres mosqueteros (2001), Israel, Judaism and the issue of the argentinidad are resumed as follows: “A los treinta y dos años, mi judaísmo se había congelado en un imperecedero amor por el moderno Estado de Israel. Eso era todo lo que me quedaba luego de treinta años de vagar por el desierto de la duda” (10) (At the age of thirty two, my Judaism has been frozen to an undying love for the modern State of Israel. This was all I was left with after thirty years of wandering in the desert of doubt). Birmajer, whose generation is marked by the experiences of the return to democracy, the me­ nemismo, and the global massive culture, opts to narrate the past from another point of view. While the generation of Feierestein and Dujovne Ortiz expresses the dilemma of “double identity” and of alienation as a personal experience lived by the proper authors, Birmajer invents this conflict in his text, recreating his family’s anecdotes, to re-affirm his identity, taken for granted from the start.

This perspective turns to the richness and pluralism, abundant in the Judeo-Argentinean culture, and offers a new kind of Jewishness: less traditional and conservative. The loyalty of his protagonist to the Argentinean nation is never questioned, and his actions and decisions are determined by other motives such as the impact of the constant crossing of borders for economic purposes and other social reasons. Israel, in that sense, is conceived as an integral part of this new sensibility as Argentinean Jews. The novel intends to recuperate the absent story of three Jewish friends in Buenos Aires, the three “mosqueteiros” (accentuated strongly in Yiddish), who disappeared from the map shortly after
the “Dirty War” began. The text opens with the return from Israel of the only survivor of the three, and the quest after the origin is represented by the journalistic task of Mossen to interview this survivor.

Nonetheless, in this novel the search for truth reveals to be a false intent: the main reason behind the return of the last “mosqueteiro” is not the desire to find peace after the political exile and the death of the rest of the members of the group, all sons of Jewish immigrants, but the curiosity to find out what happened to his former lover, left behind.

No personal crisis determines this search of the past; no sorrowful departures and repetitive desterritorializations become the center of this story of displacement. The author transforms the large historic national context into a personal anécdote, with his short and poignant narrative style, a sense of humor and an ironic tone. This deliberate strategy on behalf of the text is interpreted here as a manifestation of the lack of a profound internal conflict and demonstrates a shifting trend within the Judeo-Argentinean narrative.

In his interview for Clarín in 2000, confirmed Birmajer:

(I am faithful to my reality and try to give verisimilitude to my writings: when I am writing about a wedding ceremony, I do not picture a priest performing it, I picture a rabbi. I do not visualize the neighborhood of Villa Devoto, I visualize the Once. And the characters’ marital problems are problems typical of the Jewish community.)

In Imaginaria: Revista quincenal de literatura infantil y juvenil (2004), he added:

En muchas circunstancias el judaísmo es también una nación, una fe, una identidad. Entonces vos podés no cumplir los mandatos de la religión y sin embargo seguir siendo judío. Pero no es que yo quiera preservar el judaísmo en mi literatura. Yo utilicé mi singularidad judía para contar historias más interesantes. Me parece que un país como Argentina, donde venimos de Italia, de España, de Corea, de Perú, de la sangre judía, es un desperdicio abandonar nuestro pasado, nuestros abuelos, nuestras historias y convertirnos en algo indistinto. Se puede ser argentino judío, argentino italiano, argentino español y utilizar esas raíces para contar historias singulares.
(In many circumstances, Judaism is also a nation, a faith, an identity. Therefore, you can choose not to comply with our religion’s mandates and still continue to be Jewish. However, it is not that I wish to preserve Judaism in my literature. I use my Jewish singularity to tell more interesting stories. I think that in a country like Argentina, where we all have come from different places, such as Italy, Spain, Korea, Peru, or have a Jewish background, it is a shame to abandon our past, our grandparents, our histories, and adopt an indistinct identity. You can be a Jewish Argentinean, an Italian Argentinean, a Spanish Argentinean, and use these roots to tell unique stories.)

Zionism, Israel, Hebrew or Yiddish, along with the memories of the past, are connected to a new sensibility: they form an integral part of the Jewish identity of the younger generation without ever provoking a crisis. This new tendency generates a type of cool Judaism, secular and amusing, free from the weight of history and the responsibility of collective memory. It permits to “float” between various shores—Argentina, Israel, virtual reality and the imagination (fruitful land in the eyes of the protagonist)—without ever having to disembark, under the shelter of instantaneity and elusiveness, like a new and legitimist form of expression.

I wish to conclude this analysis returning to my initial argument: while the doubt and hesitation, expressed in the novel of Feierstein, draw attention to recognized notions such as the diasporic sentiment and the marginalization, the text of Dujovne Ortiz, El árbol de la Gitana, uses the destruction of the foundational myths and the acceptance of the eternal wandering to articulate another condition. Jerusalem (like Buenos Aires, Paris or Bogotá) is only a temporal space to reflect and Zion is a simple reflection of dreams and hopes. For the new generation, represented here by Birmajer, the revision of the past and History becomes an expression of what Boym defines as “ready-made” nostalgia (351); artifacts that merely serve the purpose of narration, since they do not consist of any personal dilemmas regarding national loyalty or belonging. In their eyes, the “Land of Promise” and “Lost Paradise” are not incorporated in any specific political territory, recent Argentina or the modern State of Israel included. They depart and return to the collective memory as a literary strategy to combat oblivion—the true challenge of our new global context.

The concept of Israel, as presented in the three novels studied briefly here, incorporates distinctive notions at once: it is the representation of a long lasting dream, a myth of origin integrated in the image of biblical Zion, a virtual space never attained fully. Feierstein and Dujovne Ortiz parody this metaphor with the aim of articulating their dilemma of alienation and the quest of belonging.
Birmajer ignores it completely or alludes to it as part of an anecdotic past. However, the element of Israel is presented also as a part of a certain political reality, a destiny for immigration and a new nexus of conflict, enclosed in the shape of the modern State of Israel. Salomón Schvel in *La logia* chooses Beer Sheva as his new place of residency, after unknown officials of the military regime threaten to harm him; Alicia Dujovne Ortiz finds in the Dead Sea the ultimate purpose of her search, and discovers the true face of *la Gitana*:

Cuando al fin quedamos frente a frente, mi madre Sheherezade no tiene la cara de cabra negra ni los ojos pardoverdos con que yo la adornara, o la velara, sino sus ojos indios, conquistadores, marranos, genoveses, irlandeses, negros, relucientes, de pestañas derechas, caídos hacia las sienes, con grandes cejas melancólicas, sabios y tiernos con toda el agua quieta. (292–93)

(When we finally face each other, my Scheherezade mother does not have the face of a black goat nor the hazel green eyes with which I have decorated her, or with which I have pictured her upon her death, but her Indian eyes, her eyes of conquerors, of *marranos*, her Genovese, Irish eyes, which were black, shiny, with straight eyelashes, turned towards her temples, with big melancholic eyebrows, her wise and tender eyes with all the quiet water.)

As for Mossen in *Los tres mosqueteiros*, the brief visit of the last survivor brings Israel as a last resort: a place to escape to, a certain “black hall” from which the past emerges and to where the characters are doomed to be placed until oblivion.

Israel, Zion, Promised Land; all these terms express one quest. Yet, it is a multiple one that represents the multifaceted and complicated circumstances that I have discussed here. It symbolizes the virtual home and an effective destination; an abstract concept and a myth. Did it maintain its primordial place as a unique site of reconciliation? Is it still an important symbol in the collective memory of Jewish experiences? These examples demonstrate that a closure can be achieved in different locations, Argentina included. As Boym pointed out, the instantaneous character of our surrounding and the current shifting trends permit us to navigate between different spaces, crossing constantly frontiers and inventing others. Israel, in that sense, is no exemption. It emerges from the novels as an open zone for modifications and appropriations of its significances. A true land of promise for those who seek their origin and who wish to explore their archive, sometimes even without leaving the threshold of their home.
Notes

1. As Derrida postulated, the Greek word *Arkhe* designates to the beginning and order of things: "the principle according to nature or history, there where things commence—physical, historical, or ontological principle—but also the principle according to the law, there where men and gods command, there where authority, social order are exercised, in this place from which order is given—nomological principle." The archive, therefore, alludes to the origin of things and the law according to which an order and authority are established.

2. During the seventies, for instance, Israel initiated a large diplomatic, economic and public campaign, supported by the United States, to assist in the exodus of Jews from the Soviet Union. The decade of the eighties saw another large and secretive diplomatic endeavor, when Israel organized the departure of the majority of the Jewish community of Ethiopia in two different clandestine operations. Unlike these circumstances, during 1976, fifty six Jews were kidnapped by terrorists at the airport of Entebbe in Uganda, and were later released in an action of the Israeli commando unit. These examples show that the political decisions of Israel in each situation varied according to the conditions and the gravity of the case, provoking often a strong international condemnations.


Argentine Literature: From Gerchunoff to Szichman (Columbia: Missouri University Press, 1989); Leonardo Senkman, La identidad judía en la literatura argentina (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Pardes, 1983); Saul Sosnowski.

5. On the Israeli diplomacy during this period: Rein, Argentina, Israel y los judíos; Zadoff, “Israel y la violación de los derechos humanos en Argentina,” ed. Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores, Estado de Israel, 30 marzo 2004 <www.mfa.gov.il/desaparecidos/dincommispen>. The following accusation of the journalist Marcel Zohar in Shalaj et ami la’azazel: Begidah be-khahol lavan: Yisra’el ve-Argentinah: Kakh hufkeru Yehudim nirdefe shilton ha-generalim (Tel-Aviv: Tzirin, 1990) should be noted as well, since it is one of the first published books to blame the Israeli embassy in Buenos Aires of insufficient action during the years of the Proceso and of lack of engagement to save persecuted Jews from the hands of the military Junta.


8. Consult the relevant documents in Jorge Lanata and Joe Goldman, Cortinas de humo: Una investigación independiente sobre los atentados contra la embajada de Israel y la AMIA (Buenos Aires: Planeta, 1994).

9. By using this term, I refer to the personal crisis associated with the sense of alienation and detachment, and lingered to a history of immigrations, persecutions and lives in the Diaspora.

10. Alberto Gerchunoff (1883–1949) was the first Jewish-Argentinean author to write and publish in the Spanish language and to be recognized publicly as such. His book Los gauchos judíos (1910) appeared around the celebrations of a century of political independence of his country, and praised idyllically the contribution of Jews to the state enterprise, their successful integration and their full social acceptance. See also: Aizenberg, Books and Bombs; Lindstrom, Jewish Issue; Senkman, La identidad judía; Sosnowski, La orilla inminente.

11. About the revitalization of the Diaspora Jew as a symbol of the strong proud sabra (The Israeli native rooted in his land), see the graphic collection in the Central Zionist Archive of the World Zionist Organization, zionistarchives.org.il, 4 abril 2003 <www.zionistarchives.org.il>.

12. For example in the novel Es difícil empezar a vivir, written by Bernardo Verbitsky (Buenos Aires: Compañía General Fabril Editora, 1963).

13. For additional information about the colonization enterprise of Baron Hirsch consult: Haim Avni, Argentina y la historia de la inmigración judía 1810–1950 (Jerusalén: Editorial Magnes, 1983); Kart Grunwald, Türkenhirsch: A Study of Baron Maurice

14. Hannah Arendt postulates that the exclusion of the Jew has to do with a certain inherent characteristic in his identity, a factor she attributed to the pariah “who has no country, for whom human rights do not exist, and whom society would gladly exclude from its privileges.” Arendt, The Jew as Pariah: Jewish Identity and Politics in the Modern Age (New York: Grove Press, 1978) 27.

15. From Hebrew—grouping of Diasporas/exiles. As mentioned in the last blessing of the Amida prayer, this term refers to the call directed to God for the return of the Jews from the affliction of exile. The recollection of all the Jews dispersed in the world was one of the first purposes of the Zionist movement, which became a political task in the State of Israel. Nonetheless, I should emphasize that the policy of the melting pot in Israel failed both as an ideology and as a social practice, the same way it did in Argentina (and other destinations for immigrants like the U.S.). Recent examples from the Israeli literature of the eighties and the nineties express different opinions on the matter: Anton Shamas, a Christian Arab, writes in Hebrew about his history in the Jewish country; Sami Michael and Dan Benaya-Seri narrate their experiences as Jewish immigrants from Arab countries; Dov Elbaum and Mira Magen write about another minority—the ultra-orthodox community of Israel; Dorit Rabinian, of a Judeo-Iranian origin, represents the new generation of Israeli authors who focus on their families’ stories, revealing with the folkloric anecdotes the pain and hardship of integration.

16. The symbolic units that constitute the official archive of the nation, hence "places of memory," and their role in the formation of a desired identity by the state and its official organism were studied by Pierre Nora, Les lieux de mémoire, (Paris: Gallimard, 1984).

17. The concept “nostalgia” derives from two Greek terms: “nostos”—the journey to return home—and “algia”—a desire. According to Boym, it expresses “a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed.” Related to a history of wars and catastrophes of the twentieth century, nostalgia does not owe much of its popularity to dislocation but to the transformation of the concept of time.” Cf. Svetlana Boym.
Works Cited


