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The Politics of *Galut*: On the Rabbinical Tradition of the Least Bad Solution

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Abstract

Since exile, the *galut*, is an outcome of Israel's defeat, the Jewish political tradition rests on the quest of the least bad solution. This contrasts with Greek-Western political theory. Residing in foreign kingdoms, Jews had to accept their domination and invest ways to survive in hostile environments. The article shows how rabbinical literature invented a kind of proto-theory of survival and opens opportunities for Jewish agency. Even the State of Israel, generally seen as a rupture in Jewish history, fits into this traditional political logic of survival in exile.

Keywords

politics – exile – power – kingdom – political regimes – rabbinical literature – nation-state – State of Israel

Introduction

The Western political tradition distinguishes political forms, that is to say the typical modes human beings assemble politically: the ancient Greek city, the Empire, the classical state, the nation-state. In Europe, the nation-state has been shaped as an ideal modern solution. It was considered, from the end of the 18th century onward, when the idea of Empire definitively collapsed, as the form that best fulfills popular sovereignty and ensures a peaceful European order. But the Jewish traditional form of the *galut* was hardly an ideal. Exile was progressively built as the solution to endure politically after what they perceived was a catastrophic loss, but, at the same time, was a relative and

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2 definitely temporary defeat. The ideal solution, the messianic one, was projected into an indefinite future, with no practical means to attain the goal. Just as the Western political ways to assemble were at first solutions to problems and then morphed into ideals to reach, the *galut*-form was taken as the least bad solution devised to survive collectively without being assembled and without the basic territorial infrastructure on which any political form rests. Here, the Jewish ideal solution did not need to be defined precisely, the hope of radical liberation and final redemption sufficed. But the least bad solution, the politics of the present, had to be realistic because it was the practical way the Jews endured across history – history understood as the temporal frame of the nations they lived in. This concrete political know-how was not systematized and was not even named, but it was effectively and often efficiently practiced.

13 The *galut*-form contrasts with all other political forms in the sense that territorial assembling is no longer thought of as a condition for surviving politically.¹ This elicits why most authors conclude that the *galut* is not political, or unpolitical, and that no such thing as a Jewish political theory or tradition has ever existed.² It led most scholars to always look ‘backwards,’ to an epoch when Israel was assembled on a territory, be it as narrow as a city-temple. However, one can clearly distinguish two contemporary currents of reading Scripture in a political perspective: on the one hand, the American one, drawing on the biblical Covenant as a model which, allegedly, is a source of modern Republicanism (which, as a matter of fact, is political Hebraism revisited); on the other hand, the continental one, reading in Israel’s ancient political shape an alternative political model to the modern European paradigm of the nation-state, a tendency that might be traced back to German tradition as expressed in Buber’s *Königtum Gottes*.³ Those two radically different endeavors for a proper ‘Jewish’ political tradition, either as a source of political modernity, or as an alternative to what is perceived as a failure of political modernity, rest both on a renewed reading of Scripture. It has much more affinity with the bibliocentric Christian-Protestant tradition than with the Jewish-rabbinical one. But when today rabbinical tradition is considered politically, it is often used to advocate opposition to any political aim and form – especially to political

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35 1 This has been stressed by Simon Dubnov, ‘Diaspora’ [1931], in M. Brenner, et al., eds., *Jüdische*
36 *Geschichte lesen. Texte der jüdischen Geschichtsschreibung im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert* (Munich
2003) 171–177. And the political imagination it rests on was masterfully described by Y. Baer,
37 *Galut* (Berlin 1936).

38 2 On this general trend, see L. Banitzky, ‘Beyond Sovereignty? Modern Jewish Political
39 Theory,’ in D. Novak and M. Kavka, eds., *The Cambridge History of Modern Jewish Philosophy*
(Cambridge 2012) 579–605.

40X 3 M. Buber, *Königtum Gottes* (Berlin 1932).

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Zionism, in view of praising a sort of idealized, diasporic, non-territorial, and non-sovereign form, be it in the *galut* or in the Land of Israel. Such a move is always made at the cost of an ignorance of the problematic structural dimension of the *galut*-form. Yet it has always been recognized, questioned, and investigated in rabbinical literature, as shall be shown.

When the Jewish dispersed communities as such (and not Israel in its ancient shape) are acknowledged as a peculiar form worthy of consideration, the question of its political quality remains disputed. Most authors will recognize that such a thing as *kahal* politics exists, traditional Jewish forms of local, communal, self-government.⁴ Politics is thus here mostly restricted to internal, domestic politics, if not mere policy, i.e., administration relative to the distribution of power and authority in the *kehillah*, and institutional management of the traditional community. What is, however, poorly acknowledged, with the notable exception of Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, is the external facet of *kahal* politics. The Jews, claims Yerushalmi, ensured their political cohesion and perseverance actively by striking vertical, 'royal' alliances with the supreme ruler of the land they resided in.⁵ This has been a constant trait of Jewish existence and has to be therefore recognized as a proper Jewish efficient political tradition. Jewish sovereignty was not just a dream or a hope, but an effective, empirical reality. Indeed, the concept of sovereignty conflates two aspects: an internal one, the power to decide the rules or laws regulating a collective body; and an external one, the power to secure and thus ensure the continuity of this body. Sovereignty is somewhat Janus-faced: one directed toward the political order of the collective body, the other looking outside.⁶ The first refers to what we call today internal politics, the second refers to external politics. When historians evaluate the political dimension of the Jewish communities in the *galut*, they generally focus on internal *kahal* politics and neglect the second aspect, the kind of foreign policy the Jews conducted in the direction of the political authority of their host land. As the Jews considered themselves and were also considered as entities authorized to reside in the kingdom, they had to regulate their relationship with the local sovereigns.⁷ Reading Scripture politically is useless here. One needs the insights of rabbinical literature,

4 From the pioneering works of Yizhak Baer and Salo Baron.

5 Y.H. Yerushalmi, *Servants of Kings and Not Servants of Servants: Some Aspects of the Political History of the Jews* (Atlanta, GA 2005). Yerushalmi argues against the common opinion expressed by Hannah Arendt that Jews were driven by mere opportunism and had no political tradition.

6 See also J. Baselson, *A Genealogy of Sovereignty* (Cambridge 1995).

7 'Kingdom' in rabbinic literature refers to any entity where legitimate power is exercised, and 'king' to the one who holds the authority.

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because comments, from one generation to another, were dedicated to exploring and understanding the *galut*-form in order to adjust Israel's form of life to its new condition, to be able to survive politically in exile.

Galut as the Least Bad Solution

At the core of the external facet of the Jewish sovereignty in the *galut* lies the relationship of the Jews with the foreign king. The way to proceed here is not summarized by the common saying 'the law of the kingdom is the law' (*dina de-malkhuta dina*), but, as we might paraphrase the formula, 'the king of the kingdom is the king.' It does not only mean that the Jews accept the foreign king's authority, that they accept to be subjected politically. As Yerushalmi showed, they actively formed an alliance with the supreme authority in order to obtain its protection from hostile intermediary powers and from the dangerous populace. Vertical alliances were the core of the Jewish foreign policy in the *galut*. Here, most researchers focus on *shtadlanut*, the kind of Jewish diplomacy directed toward foreign authorities when the situation deteriorates. But this political practice was based on a larger *proto-theory of authority*. Jews mobilize all sorts of traditional sources to orient their political practice,⁸ including the reading of the Scroll of Esther. Commentaries on the Scroll of Esther were occasions to explore the Jew's situation in the *galut*, not only because the book belongs to the genre that Biblicists call a 'Diaspora-novel,' but because, Yerushalmi argues, all catastrophic events were framed through the lens of this story as if it were the matrix of all Jewish political experiences to come. Because of the periodical return of Haman, the figure of radical enmity of the Jews, Purim became a prototype repeatedly actualized in 'secondary *purims*,'⁹ events that were apprehended and tackled in quite the same way as told in the book of Esther.

The political form called *galut*, from its inception, has thus two typical features relative to sovereignty. Although they are closely related, if not always intricately, we must distinguish them analytically. First, the Jews assess there are two laws: their own law, i.e. the eternal law received from God, and the contingent law of the kingdom; they hierarchize them in such a way as to preserve their law inside the all-over frame of the foreign kingdom's law. The principle *dina de-malkhuta dina* regulates the relationship between the Torah, the

8 Y.H. Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (Seattle 1982).

9 For a list of secondary or 'little' purims in Jewish history, see P. Goodman, *The Purim Anthology* (Philadelphia 1988).

law of Moses, and the law issued by the king in the crown-domain where Jews reside.¹⁰ This device, abundantly documented, is referred to as Jewish political autonomy. Second, the Jews assess there are two reigning kings, the king of Israel (God) and the king of the foreign territory where they reside; they hierarchize them in such a way as to obtain effective protection of the foreign king in a potential hostile internal environment, although they maintain the king reigning on all kings (God) as their real king (this is termed *shekhina de-galuta* in rabbinical literature). They thus submit themselves to the foreign king on the condition that he never usurps the status of God, namely as long as he does not claim absolute allegiance (fidelity). This device is called Jewish political heteronomy. The combination of internal quasi autonomy and external quasi heteronomy characterizes the political form called *galut*.

As the Jews never wrote any political treatise, they exploited to orient themselves politically with what was at their disposal, what the corpus of legitimate texts made available. Here, the story of Esther appeared to them as a kind of treatise with wisdom, knowledge, and practical advice on how to manage their relationships with the outside world of the nations, and they commented abundantly on all its aspects and acted according to what they extracted from it.¹¹ Historians have indefinitely speculated whether the Scroll of Esther intended to advise the Jews in exile, to criticize their exilic condition, or even if its message suggests they should have a king and a territory of their own. However, it is beyond any doubt that the story contained crucial elements necessary to reframe Israel's new situation of exile in order to survive, and was read in this manner from generation to generation.¹² It is therefore unsettling and quite telling that a book called *Powers of Diaspora*,¹³ furtively mentions Esther to contrast the feminine power of the Jews with the Roman martial, imperial ethos. And it is no less disturbing to read rabbinical commentaries of Esther as if it contained a series of Machiavellian political lessons, as if it

10 See also the introduction of chapter IX 'The Gentile State,' in M. Walzer, M. Lorberbaum and N. Zohar, eds., *Jewish Political Tradition, vol. I, Authority* (New Haven 2000) 431-435; S.-A. Goldberg, 'The Common Law and Jewish Law: The Diasporic Principle of *dina demalkuta dina*,' *Behemoth: Journal of Civilization* 2 (2008) 39-53.

11 This began very early on but became obvious from the Middle Ages. See B.D. Walfisch, *Esther in Medieval Garb: Jewish Interpretation of the Book of Esther in the Middle Ages* (Albany, NY 1993).

12 See T.S. Laniak, 'Esther's "Volkcentrism" and the Reframing of the Post-Exilic Judaism,' in L. Greenspoon and S.W. Crawford, eds., *The Book of Esther in Modern Research* (London 2003) 77-90.

13 D. and J. Boyarin, *Powers of Diaspora* (Minneapolis, MN 2002).

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constituted a manual of *Realpolitik* of some sort.¹⁴ What the rabbinical commentaries extract from the book of Esther is neither a passive art of resistance, nor warfare, but a kind of practical knowledge leaning on a proto-theory of Jewish sovereignty in the diaspora. It was sustained by an effective, empirical, practical Jewish-political tradition guided by the quest of *the least bad solution*.

Note that the quest of the least bad solution is a familiar pattern that the rabbis constantly had in mind. The way Israel's kingdom appears in 1 Samuel is typical: the people, frightened by the enemy, requests a king, like all other peoples who have a king to conduct them into war, and it is at that precise moment that God says *He* is their real king, but nevertheless says to Samuel to appoint a king upon Israel. Although the demand expresses a lack of confidence in God, and as such is a betrayal that was confined to idolatry, the kingdom is presented in the book of Samuel as the least bad solution in that situation. The way rabbinical literature articulates the two kings – God, their king, and the territorial king – in the *galut* (in the Scroll of Esther), has the same tonality, common to a least bad solution. These solutions are generated by a kind of double-bind: the urgent solution needed, a king leading his people to war, is in fact wrong, but nevertheless it imposes itself. We can contrast here the quest of the least bad solution with its opposite, the messianic quest, which aims at putting an end to Israel's alienation, and that strives to put an end to the *galut* and to recover an ideal situation where the Jews are under the unique law of the Torah and under the unique protection of God, their king; an ideal situation in which neither the law, nor the king are twofold. That there are two kings summarizes the political condition of exile.

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A Rabbinical Political Proto-theory

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Rabbinical commentaries have elaborated a proto-theory of survival, a kind of practical, unconceptualized, substitute to what is called politics in Greece.¹⁵ This proto-theory is a political theory of survival, of being saved from extreme threats (*hatzalah* or *ge'ulah*). It contrasts with the messianic tradition of being redeemed (*ge'ulah sheleimah*). Its core elements have been explicitly exposed when rabbis comment on the book of Esther, and the core of the rabbinical reading strategy of the *Megillah* lies in the way that we are invited to understand 'king.'

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¹⁴ As does Y. Hazony, *The Dawn: Political Teachings of the Book of Esther* (Tel Aviv 2000), see ch. 20: 'The Jew's War,' 205–206.

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¹⁵ See D. Trom, *Persévérance du fait juif. Une théorie politique de la survie* (Paris 2018).

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As we know, the book of Esther unfolds like a thriller. The narrative tension is organized in such a way that the reader is in the position to hope that the decision to eradicate the Jews shall be hindered and to search for the agent in the position to intervene, to inactivate the murderous decree before its execution. Esther, the king's new wife, obeying to her tutor Mordecai, seems to be this agent. But rabbinical comments identify a verse in which the salvation of the Jews from destruction is announced and guaranteed much sooner in the story, namely in Esther 6:1: 'On that night the sleep of the king wandered; and he commanded to bring the book of records of the chronicles, and they were read before the king.'

I will mainly focus on classical comments on the first part of the verse, although those on the second part are also very instructive. The recurrent question asked in standard comments to the first segment of the verse is 'to whom' the sleep wandered? Megillah 15b seems to oppose two opinions:

R. Naḥman bar Isaac said: 'The word [king] is written defectively. "On that night the sleep of the king wandered" (Esther 6:1).' R. Tanḥum said: 'The sleep of the King of the Universe wandered.' The Rabbis say: 'Those above were disturbed and those below were disturbed.' Rava said: 'It literally means "the sleep of king Ahasuerus."'

Following this midrash, the sleep from God wandered because 'king' is written defectively (this means: without mentioning his name); and the sleep of King Ahasuerus also wandered. Both are correct. There is no dispute here but the superposition of two correct ways to read the verse: at first sight we read King Ahasuerus, but as 'the king' is written without mentioning his name, one has to read God; but nevertheless the reader knows that the verse is really about King Ahasuerus.¹⁶ This splitting of the meaning of 'king' in two is asserted in a more systematic way in Midrash Esther Rabbah upstream from Esther 6:1 when the segment of Esther 1:5 'the king's royal palace' is discussed:

R. Yudan and R. Levi in the name of R. Yoḥanan said: 'wherever in the Megillah we find "the king Ahasuerus" the text really is about Ahasuerus; wherever in the Megillah we find just "the king," it might be or *this* king or God.'

¹⁶ The sequence is here a good illustration of rabbinical reading strategy where *derash* never abolishes the obvious sense of a verse (*eyn miqra' yotze midei peshuto*).

IX This general reading device of the scroll is also applied in Esther Rabbah
2 on Esther 7:10: 'So they hanged Haman on the gallows that he had prepared
3 for Mordecai. Then the king's wrath was assuage.' The midrash comments: 'As
4 it is written defectively the king, it is the king of kings (*melekh ha-melakhim*,
5 *ha-kadosh barukh hu*).'

6 With that in mind, let us go back to Esther 6:1 'On that night the sleep of
7 the king wandered.' In Midrash Esther Rabbah the insomnia is firstly the one
8 of God. This immediately raises the question if God is subject to sleep. The
9 answer is extracted from Psalms 121:4: 'Behold, the guardian of Israel neither
10 sleep nor slumber': God might sleep but he will not. Otherwise, the midrash
11 explains, one would not understand Psalms 44:24: 'Awake, why do you sleep,
12 Lord?' The midrash then concludes: 'God sleeps when Israel is in distress.' But
13 when the king is really Ahasuerus, his insomnia is directly related by the com-
14 ments to his concrete worries, namely that Haman wants to kill him and that
15 Esther may be unfaithful to him. The Midrash Aba Gurion and Esther Rabbah
16 both explain King Ahasuerus could not sleep because he dreamed that Haman
17 intends to kill him [as is written in Esther 6:4 when King Ahasuerus asks,
18 'who is in the yard?']; tractate Megillah and Midrash Panim aherim both say
19 Ahasuerus could not sleep because he suspected Haman and Esther conspire
20 to kill him.

21 Midrash Panim aherim B on Esther 6:1 goes a step further:

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23 It's not written the sleep of Ahasuerus but the sleep of the king. The sleep
24 of the king, of the king of all kings (*melekh kol ha-melakhim*). But is there a
25 sleep above? When Israel sins, then he sleeps one might say (*ki-veyakhol*)
26 but when Israel respects God's will God does not sleep.

27 Psalms 121:4

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29 The expression *ki-veyakhol* indicates that God's sleep is a way to talk, a way to
30 say that Israel is in distress. The midrash concludes: 'God does not leave Israel
31 in distress; when Israel is afraid (anxious, *tzarah*) and calls God, what does he
32 do? He disturbs Ahasuerus's sleep.' We thus have here two assertions: there
33 is an insomnia of Ahasuerus caused by his concrete political worries, and an
34 insomnia of God, which is a way to talk of Israel's distress.

35 Now, the Targum rishon on Esther 6:1 goes another step further: 'That night
36 the sleep of *ha-kadosh barukh hu* in the height of heaven wandered.' And a bit
37 further:

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39 God forgives, because for him there is no sleep: when the house of Israel
40X sinned, he did as if (*ke-ilu*) he was asleep. But when they obey to his will,
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he neither sleeps nor slumbers as is written 'he neither sleeps nor slumbers, the guardian of Israel.'

Psalms 121:4

The Targum explains: 'God is making himself as if he is asleep' ('*osseh 'atzmo ke-ilu*'); he feigns he is asleep. Targum rishon and sheni both come to the same conclusion extracted from Psalms 121:4, and then expand on the complaint of the Jews to God, reminding him of all his previous deeds in favor of Israel, especially their liberation from Egypt, and imploring '*adon ha-'amim*' not to abandon his people, because this time Israel will not just be sold out like a slave, but eradicated, 'erased from the earth.'

Here, the motive of the feigned sleep of God means that God threatens to abandon his people, and his awakening from the feigned sleep means that he finally saves his people. The motive comes regularly in midrashic literature: it is reiterated in the Yalqut Shim'oni on Esther 6:1 and, vice versa, when the Yalqut Shim'oni comes to comment on the sleep in Psalms, the midrash convenes Esther 6:1 to attest that the sleep of the guardian is always feigned. Esther 6:1 and Psalms 121:4 are thus bonded, they call each other, they always stick together in midrashic literature, one clarifying the other, as we can also verify in the Mekhilta de Rabbi Yishmael (*Massekhta de-shirata*) on Psalms.

Now, let us go back to the Midrash Panim aherim B on Esther 6:1: 'When Israel is afraid and calls God, what does he do? He disturbs Ahasuerus's sleep.' Note that the same midrash adds a bit further on that the angels in heaven hear the cry of Israel and send one of them to awaken Ahasuerus. Nevertheless, the midrash says here clearly that 'God disturbs Ahasuerus's sleep.' We thus stand very close to the Greek translation of Esther 6:1 transmitted in the Christian tradition: 'But the Lord [Kurios, the Master, adon] kept sleep from the king [Basileos, *melekh*].' One sees easily why there is great suspicion that the Masoretic verse was replaced here by a piece of rabbinical explanation in the process of transliteration.

Note that in the Greek Esther the division of *melekh* has vanished in Esther 6:1 because the first entity, the king of kings, God, who is called here the Lord (Kurios, adon), acts directly on King Ahasuerus; he 'kept sleep from the king.' In the Septuagint version of Esther 6:1, God and king appear thus clearly as two distinct entities *in the text*. But in the Hebrew text 'the sleep of the king wandered,' sleep is active and the king passive, leading to the rabbinical question to whom it happens and who is active. Even if the comment of the Midrash Panim aherim on Esther 6:1 is equivalent to the Greek translation of Esther 6:1, it has a very different meaning because it is here the that commentator performs, from a position *outside of the text*, from the position of the

IX reader, the division of king in two distinct entities. In the Greek version, the
2 two entities are divided in the text, which therefore is a *new* text, a new story
3 of Esther, while in the midrash the same word *in the text* is divided in two from
4 outside the text.

5 Regarding the extreme prevention against idolatry in Scripture and rabbinical
6 Judaism, one can at first glance be astonished the rabbis never hesitate to
7 put God and the king in such a dangerous proximity. If 'king' can be either
8 Ahasuerus or God, do we not risk confusing them? Let us put the question
9 differently: Is the Septuagint version of Esther 6:1 that transposes a rabbinical
10 conclusion in Greek about the meaning of Esther 6:1 more 'Jewish' than the
11 midrash? It is surely more Christian, more modern, but, precisely moving away
12 from Jewish political knowledge. To show this we need to have a better insight
13 into the rabbinical reading strategy relating to Esther 6:1.

14 We have seen that the midrash recommends reading 'King Ahasuerus,' as
15 this king was really mentioned in the Megillah, and to read 'king' defectively
16 either as God, or as *this* king. When we come to read 'king' in the Megillah,
17 we thus need to oscillate; the word indeed has a double significance, but to
18 extract the two (king and god) we have to switch actively; we have to perform
19 two distinct interpretations successively, one after the other. One cannot
20 read the two simultaneously. The two entities are as distant as possible since
21 they exclude each other; one has to vanish in order to let the other emerge.
22 Reading *melekh* as God and reading it as King Ahasuerus, exclude one another.
23 Although the same word, *melekh*, is readable as 'King of Kings' and as 'King of
24 flesh and blood,' its significance remains in the midrash completely separate
25 and distinct.

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28 **A Rabbinical Political Inquiry**

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30 The twofold status of 'king' in the midrash thus follows a structural logic. It is
31 the *function*, the protective function in itself, associated to the title 'king' that
32 is the very entity that rabbinic literature divides. What is first is the *shomer*
33 *yisra'el* – the guardian or watchman of Israel – and the anxious belief that
34 he will effectively never sleep, that vigilance will be constant, uninterrupted.
35 Then comes the question to whom it falls to perform the function. It falls firstly
36 to *melekh malkhei ha-melakhim*, the ideal king (God). He is ideal not only in
37 the sense that He is almighty, not only in the sense that He is the entity that
38 promised his people they will exist forever, but because this entity is an equiva-
39 lent for the idea of absolute protection, an equivalent for Israel's eternity, for
40X Israel's practical survival. And, secondly, the function falls to extensional kings,

on empirical exemplars of incarnated kings, the *melekh basar ve-dam* (the king of flesh and blood), as he is named in most midrashim; it falls to *this* empirical exemplar of king that disposes of a relative power to protect, depending on his reign and on the circumstances. Rabbinical comments on Esther clearly state that when an incarnated king reigns, as Ahasuerus does, on the whole surface of the earth, he verges on being the ideal king. Obviously, he is not the ideational king but because of this extensive territorial reign, he has affinity with *melekh malkhei ha-melakhim*, he is similar to God considering his protective power. This deep affinity is strictly established in the midrash regarding the function of the *shomer*: they can be compared relatively to the factuality of protection that they both are able to provide. The embodied king can potentially ensure the most complete protection as if (*ke-ilu*) he were the ideal king. They fulfill the same function. They thus form a pair, a *functional* pair. Given that this function of preservation called the *shomer* is split in two parts, a triad arises: the Jews, the King, The King of Kings.

This rabbinical political proto-theory has thus all the traits of a quest of the least bad solution. It is a quest, as it rests on a question ‘who is the king?’, the constant watchman or the empirical, territorial, watchman. The rabbinical reasoning is here neither allegorical nor metaphorical but analogical: as *melekh* always connotes the power of protection, this power, in the *galut*, has to be split into two. In the Scroll of Esther (in the *galut*), the name of God is not mentioned. One main explanation for this anomalous and disturbing absence in rabbinical tradition is that God hides His face in the *galut* (the rabbis ask where the name of Esther is mentioned in Scripture besides in the scroll, and answer ‘*ve-anokhi haster astir panay*’ [And I will surely hide my face; Deut. 31:18]). On the other hand, we have seen that God is named in the Scroll when *melekh* is written defectively; this is another way for him to be present in the *galut*. The answer to the question who is the guardian of Israel, is that both are, *melekh malkhei ha-melakhim* and *melekh basar ve-dam*, God and the incarnated king. How they relate, is then the crucial problem. The midrash does not provide such a clear-cut answer, but explains that protective power is a matter of *quest*; reading the *Megillah* and commenting upon Esther is precisely exploring the world, producing knowledge about the political environment the Jews live in. The function of protection is always present, active, no matter what is happening in the world, whatever empirical experience. One has to *presume* it is the actual king of flesh and blood who will instantiate the function. Comments on Esther thus articulate an axiom and a hypothesis in a dynamic way, in order to open a political investigation, an inquiry in all present critical situations. King defectively and King Ahasuerus form here a *dialectical* pair. And it is the function that both entities fulfill potentially which confers its impulse to the

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dialectics between the two poles. God is indeed the *shomer yisra'el*, but in the *galut* the Jews need to find the least bad solution, they need to find *substitutes* for His protection. To find the effective *shomer* in order to survive in history, in the temporal milieu of the nations they reside in, is the least bad solution for Israel in the *galut*. Rabbinical comments invite the reader into exploring the concrete dialectics of fiction (God is the protective king) and presumption (the territorial king is the protector) in all present situations, in all concrete political crises, since crises, the awakening of enmity (Haman), are the only sort of political events that occur regularly in the *galut*.

Conclusion

The rabbinical political proto-theory of Jewish survival is functional. Political power is a tool. Israel in exile explores the least bad political solution to surmount even ultimate threats, as in the story of Esther. Israel's protection is at once the history of Israel's survival in an ever changing and threatening environment. This brings us to the crucial question: what is the actual Jewish State, whose name is the State of Israel, in a world of nation-states?¹⁷ Does it imitate the best solution of the Western nation-state, or is it the first step towards total redemption? In both cases, we would face a revolution in Jewish history. However, another answer is proposed here: this State remains immersed in the Jewish pragmatic tradition of the quest of the least bad solution. The Jewish State is neither the nation-state of the Jews, nor the fulfillment of the messianic promise, but the actual form of the guardian of Israel, as the foreign king, one might argue. This was precisely Herzl's position. The underlying diagnosis of Herzl's *Judenstaat* is:¹⁸ nation-states emancipated Jews altogether; popular sovereignty blocked the traditional device of splitting the king into two, so that passing alliances with the king are now impossible. And yet the Jews are still threatened. Jews are therefore pushed toward a variation of the least bad solution: build a sovereign and project it out of Europe in order to find protection in its shade. The Shoah, which is like a 'failed Purim,' confirmed Herzl's diagnosis: the Jews know that the king is not only capable of deciding to kill them, but of actually carrying out this decision. A State for the Jews was therefore actively searched and finally granted, authorized from outside, by the powerful

17 On the multi-layered 'hopes' of the Jews, see Y.H. Yerushalmi, 'Vers une histoire de l'espoir juif,' *Esprit* 8–9 (1985) 21–38.

18 T. Herzl, *Der Judenstaat* (Leipzig, Vienna 1896).

imperial king, which is a donation process in accordance with the tradition.¹⁹ The State for the Jews is thus an *ersatz* of the territorial king whose protective function in Europe is no longer fulfilled. Building a state meant that the Jews were striving to have, for *themselves*, a king of flesh and blood, a foreign power in order to be protected in its shade. If so, the State of Israel, today's least bad solution regarding the situation, remains an integral part of the Jewish traditional strategy of survival in the *galut*.

¹⁹ Y. Shavit and B. Harshav, 'Cyrus King of Persia and the Return to Zion: A Case of a Neglected Memory,' *History and Memory* 2, no. 1 (1990) 51–83.

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