from *THE CHANT OF BEING*

Gil Ben Aych

They entered the active phase of preparation. There was intense busyness, a little like the days when the seamstress came to the house in Tlemcen, Algeria. Jeannette, Simon's mother, was running all about. She had to see to the reception at home. Joseph, Simon's father, was overcome. He was in charge of coordination with the synagogue and the rabbi, and had to invite the guests.

Gilberte, a cousin from Versailles, came to help out. Aunt Rosette, too. She lived in Créteil and often aided her younger sister following the birth of a child or at other exceptional moments. She would stay on rue Truffaut, in Paris, at Jeannette's and Joseph's place, as she did now. The trip seemed very long to her, and she would repeat that "back in Tlemcen, the distances weren't the same, here we're really far apart, do you realize how long it took me to get from Créteil to the 17th arrondissement, here . . . !"

Jeannette and Rosette had prepared a considerable number of main dishes and cakes, little omelettes and *méguinas:* patties made of egg and potato, stuffed with fresh vegetables, topped with lamb brains cooked in parsley.

Gilberte asked Simon if he believed. If he had faith. He answered no. Just like that. He added that it was to please his grandparents and

receive gifts that he had agreed to the Bar Mitzvah. Or the communion, as they called it at Simon's house. But he had learned otherwise from the Hebrew school he attended last term with his brother Abram, and from a neighbor, a European Jewish woman; and from certain family acquaintances who were studying Hebrew. They taught him that a Jew did not take "communion," he had a "Bar Mitzvah" to mark his accession to religious adulthood. The nuance seemed decisive and distinctive. Nonetheless, the words "Bar Mitzvah" had a biblical or theological connotation that his parents did not attach to "communion." "Communion" was a more fitting word for a specific act in time, a good excuse for a festive family gathering.

In the afternoons, they sent out the last invitations, to people whose addresses they had only just gotten. They sat around the table, putting stamps on envelopes. The sun's rays flooded the old wooden floor, and their faces shone. The women ate dates to pass the time.

They got up early. Joseph went quickly downstairs to warm up the car. He waited, honking the horn from time to time, to hurry them up. Jeannette reacted by asking: "What's wrong with Joseph? Why is he getting so worked up, today of all days?" The day of his Bar Mitzvah. The day. This day. Today is the Bar Mitzvah.

They washed up. They had installed a little shower in the kitchen. They did not have one before. Simon and Abram put on their "nice suits," with white socks and new black loafers. Jeannette kept saying: "Don't press down the back of your shoes," worried as she was about things staying in good shape. She watched over everything. She shut off the gas jets and closed the blinds (it seemed to Simon as though they were leaving for several months). The neighbors were astonished at all the activity, but were simply told of the good news, the Bar Mitzvah, without further comment. It would have been necessary to go into detail about differences in religion and ritual, and no one really felt like it. Except for the baker's wife, who offered them some candy before they set off.

The conventional, general silence that the Christian neighbors kept in the face of an act so meaningful, so revelatory of religious identity, was nothing new to Simon, who had had a clear, sharp perception of it on his arrival in France in 1956. It seemed as though the silence of the others, in the face of something so different (not to mention anomalous or even monstrous), were a kind of respect, a self-contained, mute,

unspeakable deference, the mark of a relevant, significant distance. "People" knew! "People" knew that Simon's family (*not* "was" Jewish but . . .) "was-not-Christian!" They were known to be different. And Simon realized this was known.

Nonetheless, Simon suspected that speaking of these differences would allow the real differences, the true ones, to be understood; but he then felt, at one and the same time, shame and the need to keep a distance. Shame because it was not right for a boy of his age, thirteen years old, to teach adults, who perhaps knew the score after all. Perhaps. Distance, a need to keep a distance, because he realized that to speak of the difference would only attract attention. Attention to the difference, not to Simon. And since Simon did not want to attract attention, he preferred to remain silent. Like everyone else. No. Like Simon. Simon, already, did not like to "attract attention."

They jumped into the grey Peugeot 403, crossed the outer boulevards, and arrived at the synagogue of the 18th arrondissement where the Bar Mitzvah was to take place.

It was near the rue Custine, and Rabbi Judas, his father Joseph's cousin, who lived on rue Stephenson, would be there. It had become more and more difficult for him to get around, because of his age, but Joseph insisted on his being there. He, and none other, would officiate at the ceremony.

They entered a bright, bare, vast room. In the center, towards the front, stood the men; and in back, towards the side, the women took their seats. There was a sort of wooden rostrum, covered with an immaculate embroidered cloth, white and pomegranate-colored velvet. At the forefront were the *sepharim.**

In comparison to the grandiose synagogue Simon had known in Tlemcen, the one here seemed laughable and almost shabby. It made you feel as though Jews had no place in France and hid in order not to call attention to their activities. Were their activities reprehensible? Not as far as I know, said Simon to himself. Why was it so small? The tiny synagogue. The narrow Jew. Shrunken Judaism. European cleanliness and skimpy Judaism. Back there, in Tlemcen, in Algeria, the synagogue took up almost an entire block; here, you went in through the door of a house like all others. This detail mattered. Simon asked his father why and was told that it was a question of "lack of funds." Simon only half-believed him but decided to make do with half a belief. He said to himself, baldly,

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**Sepharim* (Hebrew): scrolls.

it may be hard to believe but so it is. Not believing his own eyes, Simon closed them, and believed. Simon would believe. He finally opened his eyes. It was time. It was high time he opened his eyes. That was the very purpose of a communion. Today's the communion. Today?

They began with the short morning prayer, during which a strip of leather is wrapped around the arm. Likewise, a kind of cube, made of the same material and containing biblical verses, is held on the forehead by a band of leather we strap around our heads. The tefillin. The faithful Jew, literally tied to the texts, his forehead marked with the sacred seal, devotes himself to the ritual morning prayer—an act of allegiance to God that Simon found hard to accept but took delight in, because of its incongruous, unexpected, almost obscene character. He was on the rostrum. (Strange to think that addressing God was something strictly personal! For a long time, he was obsessed by a problem present in all religions, but more pronounced in Judaism because of its minority status. If God is supposed to be there for all of us, he must "really" be there for each of us. He's "our" solo player. Mine. The great universal dialogue and private monologues. Generalized, pervasive cacophony. Universal harmony. Because we are there and because we speak. It's us.)

Simon wore a new *tallit* given to him by his godfather, the other Simon. He liked the silky material of the prayer shawl and especially the soft white fringes hanging at the ends. You put it on your shoulders and you were covered before God. He also wore a small red velvet skullcap that his aunt Esther, a seamstress, had made him from leftover material. But the skullcap annoyed him. It was too small and kept falling off. It wasn't a real silk skullcap, embroidered with Hebrew writing, like the ones adults wore. They helped him. They helped him several times to put it back on.

Simon liked embracing the *sepharim*. It seemed as though he were embracing the entire world and its eternal spirit. He felt like crying when he held the sacred scrolls in his arms. He recited his portion without really understanding it, because he had learned it by heart, over a three-month period, during Bar Mitzvah lessons at the synagogue. He did recognize some words. Whence his ability to associate or connect words from other languages—Arabic, French, English, even German or Spanish—with their Semitic "roots," when the occasion presented itself. (Thus *zit* in Hebrew, becomes *zeit* in Arabic, keeps the *i* to become *huile* in French, loses the *u* and gains an *o* to make *oil* in English. Languages can transform or keep consonants at their leisure. *Z* stays *z* as one moves from Hebrew to Arabic, it switches from *z* to *h* going from Arabic to

French, there's no more *h* in English, *öl* in German turns the *i* into an umlaut on the *o*, ending up with *zeitoun* meaning "olive" in Arabic and Zeitoun as the last name of one of his friends in fifth grade. Zeitoun. *Z* and *t* from the ancient Hebrew disappear, the *i* remains. A straight stick standing up and on the top a point or head. Man walks vertically through history, on the ground. And the history of words goes on, unremittingly, underneath. Languages referring to each other. Words calling words. Our words calling out to each other and beyond.) Whence also the knowing, unspeakable, joy of posting oneself, of being posted at the source of a phenomenon that concerns everyone. Speaking. Writing. Communicating. And using words whose far-removed origins and semantic aura he, Simon, sometimes knew. Semantic. Semitic. Fast-found mimicry among languages. A primitive effect. Writing.

He was rather unhappy when he had to put the *sepharim* back in the lovely ark that looked like a little house. He would have wished to keep them longer or even take them home, so beautiful were they. He liked the little silver towers perched on their very tops and at the ends of which hung little bells of sorts.

What impressed him particularly was the finger you hold to follow the text. He preferred by far to read from right to left. This was quite a change from his school books that all looked alike with their ugly pictures. Here things were strange and uncanny. Simon felt he was part of an elite. Yes, an elite. Or more exactly a group that resembled no other and that was truly distinctive. Here, he was far from all his friends and even tended to scorn them. Not having had the same experience as he, they would never understand things the way Jews could. They. The others. Simon thus displayed a sureness that quickly turned into superiority. Simon read. In Hebrew, Simon read. He read. Simply enough.

The rabbi helped him follow the text. Simon took special care in reading his portion because what pleased him above all, as though it were his duty, was that no classmate should do so well as he or get so good a grade. Not even the Polish or Russian Jews, whom he learned then to call Ashkenazim, a word he easily remembered because his father's boss in Algeria was named Ashkenazi. Services were different at their synagogues.

Moreover, Simon hardly understood how Jews could be designated by a word with the syllable *az*. The thing seemed impossible to him, even comical, in short: contemptible. Laughable. This contempt Simon transferred onto the Ashkenazim themselves. In his eyes, they were hardly Jews.

He had had, however, more than once, the opportunity of learning that impossible things were indeed possible. So he was not unduly surprised. When Simon thought this way, he opened his eyes wide, to absorb what he saw. Stunned, Simon would absorb and forget. He would forget. Simon would forget. Simon was jubilant, detesting the Catholics. He also detested that notorious Ashkenazi, with whom his father had fallen out because he tried to cheat him of his due.

At the time, paradoxically, the relationship between German and the word "Ashkenazi," despite historical events, was not obvious. The association, hidden in the recesses of the unconscious, was taboo. Only much later did he find out that Ashkenazi meant "German" and Sephardi "Spanish." In this way, certain words conceal in their depths connotations or meanings that emerge later. Certain words, and their chrysalises.

Moreover, Simon liked Hebrew pronunciation, the *shin* and the *bet,* the lack of vowels and the greatly condensed vocabulary. It was indeed a communion, a means of communion among members of a minority who assigned to it a unique quality. When the rabbi addressed him—Simon—by name, reciting in Hebrew the names of his father and mother, of his grandfathers and grandmothers, of his great-grandfathers and great-grandmothers, Simon, he, Simon, wiped away tears with a brand-new handkerchief. Brand-new. He heard the women say amen and pray in Arabic as they extolled him. (That the women prayed in Arabic, while the men read Hebrew, added to the confusion, kept Simon from separating Jews and Arabs clearly and distinctly, at least as far as his family in Algeria was concerned. Those women praying, were they Jewish, were they Arab? The question reflected the fact that in Algeria only men were considered fit to learn Hebrew. If a woman knew Hebrew—unless she were a notable scholarly exception—she simply repeated prayers recited a hundred thousand times over. By men!) He turned to the left where there stood a table covered with pomegranate-colored velvet embroidered with gold thread. He continued reading from another book. He thought of all the weddings he had attended, and felt as though he himself were getting married to everyone and no one. Getting married. To everyone and no one.

This idea enraptured Simon, even as it embarrassed him. Only long afterwards did he grasp its exact significance, when he realized that everyone was close to him and no one was close to him, really close to him, to himself, to self. He had married himself having become a man. Communion.

When he arrived at the last lines of his reading, a girl cousin threw sugar-coated almonds at him. He embraced Rabbi Judas, who had a full white beard; his father, Joseph, who stood at his side; his mother, Jeannette, as he came down from the rostrum; his grandmothers, Etoile and Hanna. A member of the synagogue came forward to ask the women to return to their places. Jeannette retorted that she was allowed to kiss her son at his communion, on the day of his communion. God would not mind.

Simon received several gifts. Uncle Jacques handed him a completely white envelope, inscribed with his first name, which intrigued him. He saw the joy, the true happiness, on his family's lips. He remained on the rostrum. Simon. On the rostrum.

It was his brother's turn, his brother Abram, his junior by two years, who liked Hebrew less and whom they had managed to convince even though he did not understand why he had to go through the same thing again. The same thing as Simon. After Simon had done it. His *tallit* was on crooked and kept sliding around, the black leather cube made him appear one-eyed, his skullcap rode down his neck. When he pulled up his sleeve in order to wrap the leather strip around his forearm, he seemed half-undressed, as though he were waiting to be examined by a doctor or getting on his pajamas. His shirttails emerged from his trousers.

He was rather embarrassed and annoyed, he was unsure of his portion and the rabbi kept correcting him because he either read the wrong line or mispronounced words. The worshipers, egged on by Uncle Jacques, began to laugh and make comments. Although absorbed in his reading, Abram raised his head from time to time to cast a curious glance at Judas or to gauge the onlookers' response. His gestures triggered a comic reaction, which then redoubled. So that at the end of a slight half-hour of torture, the rabbi cut things short. Cut Abram's portion short.

Uncle Jacques called out: "We should have said, 'Encore!!! Encore.'" A legend came to be, which attributed the remark to Abram.

Simon's chagrin, the unspeakable dream, the obvious glance, the future presence, the narrow Jew, the semantic aura, Abram's remark.

A few female cousins were in charge of the record player and switched among Arabic songs, rock music, and slow dances.

Debates started between partisans of one or another kind of music. Upon hearing "modern" music, Hanna turned to Grandmother Etoile

and said, "*Cassement de tête.*"* Etoile answered, "*Rass tertek,*" which meant exactly the same thing, but in Arabic.

By listening to his grandmothers, or others, repeat in Arabic what they had just said in French, Simon began to appreciate the differences between the two languages and sense the originality of each. If the phrase meant exactly the same thing in French and Arabic, then there was no reason to say it in both languages. Nonetheless, they said it, repeated it, in both languages. Etoile and Hanna would repeat it. That proved that one language (in this case, Arabic) brought in a nuance that was absent from the other. Here, *rass tertek* added to *cassement de tête* the idea of incessant repetition and irreparable damage. Rock was thus perceived by the two Arab grandmothers as a kind of monotony as well as a sort of smashing, a violent cracking, a total break.

When Simon thought about such things, he liked to go from one language to the other and enjoyed, really enjoyed, the art of nuances. An art of nuances that moved between the local idiolect (the Judeo-Algerian Arabic of Tlemcen) and a mixture of a colonized people's approximate French (which he heard around him) and standard French (which he learned at school). Simon thus had the best reasons to perceive nuances. He appreciated distinctions. He was distinguished. Languages distinguished him. Thus Simon began to forge a language: a language that was not Arabic, or Hebrew, or French. A language. His language. Simon's language.

Others thought that it was not right to play such music on a communion day. This was no ordinary celebration, like a birthday party. The religion had to be respected. So they put Samy el Magrebi back on, along with other Jewish singers who performed liturgical chants in a singsong. The debates stopped. Calm returned.

Translated from the French by Alan Astro.

**Cassement de tête* (French): splitting headache, deafening noise.