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Jorge Luis Borges's Poetic Response To the Arab-Israeli Six Day War

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At variance with the pro-Arab stance that most Latin American intellectuals assumed during the Arab-Israeli Six-Day War (June 5-10, 1967), Jorge Luis Borges's life-long connection to "lo hebreo," as he called it, translated into "an immediate taking of sides" with Israel ("Autobiographical Essay" 257). As war erupted between Israel and its Egyptian, Jordanian, and Syrian neighbors, Borges expressed his felt kinship to the Jewish state in the poem "A ISRAEL." In the war's aftermath he penned a second poem, "ISRAEL." Whereas the Jewish motifs that proliferate in Borges's prose have been well studied, his poetry has received much less critical attention. What is more, Borges's belletristic conceptualization of the Jewish state has gone completely unstudied. Toward remedying these critical oversights, this article will offer a close reading of the two poems Borges composed in the summer of 1967.¹

Borges's inclination towards "lo hebreo" is nothing typical in Latin American letters, and even less so in Argentina, the only country in Latin America to have had a full-fledged pogrom, the *semana trágica* of January 1919 (Stavans "A Comment on Borges's Response to Hitler" 2). Nonetheless, as Ilan Stavans explains, "[t]hroughout his life, Jorge Luis Borges (1899-1986), a non-Jew, was infatuated with Jewish motifs and symbols" ("A Comment on Borges's Response to Hitler" 1). In *El Tejedor del Aleph: Biblia, Kábala y judaísmo en Borges*, Edna Aizenberg traces the roots of Borges's philo-Semitism, as well as its expression in his writing. Aizenberg notes that early in life Borges connected Judaism with a non-dogmatic intellectual and metaphysical curiosity, with "aquella parte del alma que merece ser cultivada, con la amplitud intelectual, la heterodoxia y el cosmopolitismo. El judaísmo, además, integra una actitud inconformista, de distanciamiento de las normas establecidas" (19). Later, Borges came

¹ I am grateful to Donald L. Shaw for his insightful comments on an earlier draft of this article. My thanks also go to the editors of *Hipertexto* and its anonymous reviewers for their thoughtful critiques.

to view Judaism as the antithesis of ultra-nationalism, religious intolerance, and xenophobia (Aizenberg 20).

Borges's attraction to Judaism and to the diasporic Jews' critical distance from the dogmatic mode of Western thought metamorphosed into an identification with the State of Israel (Aizenberg 69-70). He explains the following:

Since my Genevan days, I had always been interested in Jewish culture, thinking of it as an integral part of our so-called Western civilization, and during the Israeli-Arab war of a few years back I found myself taking immediate sides. While the outcome was still uncertain, I wrote a poem of the battle. A week after, I wrote another on the victory. ("Autobiographical Essay" 257)

The two poems written in 1967, one during and one immediately after the Six-Day War, are the highpoint of Borges's pro-Israel sentiments. Later he would question whether the State of Israel would eradicate the characteristics of the Jew that he found so favorable, characteristics in large part formed due to the diasporic experience: internationalism, linguistic pluralism, and intellectual preeminence (Aizenberg 70). Nonetheless, as the Six-Day War erupted, Borges was concerned about the threat to the existence of the State of Israel. He signed a declaration of solidarity with Israel, and went to the Sociedad Hebraica Argentina to be, according to him, with his friends in a difficult moment (Aizenberg 73). His position, as Emir Rodríguez Monegal explains, was one in opposition to most of the left-wing Latin American intellectuals of the period, who took a pro-Arab stance (*Jorge Luis Borges* 451-2). Aizenberg writes: "Israel como estado judío viviendo bajo la permanente amenaza de la destrucción era para Borges un momento más en la batalla cíclica entre el judío y el antijudío, que ya le había inclinado hacia 'lo hebreo', y que en la Guerra de los Seis Días renovó esta inclinación" (72).

"A ISRAEL" first appeared in the Jewish-Argentine journal *Davar*, number 112, January-March 1967, and was later published in the collection *Elogio de la sombra* (1969).

A ISRAEL

¿Quién me dirá si estás en el perdido
Laberinto de ríos seculares
De mi sangre, Israel? ¿Quién los lugares
Que mi sangre y tu sangre han recorrido?
No importa. Sé que estás en el sagrado
Libro que abarca el tiempo y que la historia
Del rojo Adán rescata y la memoria
Y la agonía del Crucificado.
En ese libro estás, que es el espejo
De cada rostro de Dios, que en su complejo
Y arduo cristal, terrible se adivina.
Salve, Israel, que guardas la muralla
De Dios, en la pasión de tu batalla. (OC 996)

The poem is a modification of the classic sonnet. Its hendecasyllabic lines, alternating without any apparent order between sapphic, melodic, and heroic accent patterns, follow the consonant rhyme scheme ABBA CDDC EEF GG. Notably, Borges's sonnet lacks a fourteenth and final line, one that would rhyme with the last line of the first tercet. The content of the poem, the people of Israel and Judaism, suggests that its conspicuous thirteen lines, rather than the orthodox fourteen, may be related to Kabbalah. Borges's interest in the Kabbalah is found throughout his oeuvre, and has been well-studied.² Kabbalistic elements are present in stories such as "El Aleph," "El gólem," "Las ruinas circulares," "La muerte y la brújula," and "Emma Zunz," and is discussed in his non-fiction article from 1932 "Una vindicación de la cábala." Borges was fascinated with the Kabbalah's concept of the metaphysical principles of numbers (Stavans *Borges and the Jews* 22). The system of Gematria assigns numerical value to each letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Thirteen, the number of lines in "A ISRAEL," is one of the most holy numbers in Judaism as it is closely related to God. The Hebrew words one, *echad*, and love, *ahavah*, which describe the attributes of God, are composed of letters that add up to thirteen. When the value of these two words are added together we get twenty six, which is the numerical equivalent of the Tetragrammaton, the Hebrew name for God, another of Borges's cabalistic fascinations, as evinced in his "La muerte y la brújula."

"A ISRAEL" begins with an *interrogatio* that continues on until halfway through the third line: "¿Quién me dirá si estás en el perdido / Laberinto de ríos seculares / De mi sangre, Israel?" In this first quatrain, the poetic voice apostrophizes Israel in the informal second person "tú," and wonders aloud whether somewhere and at sometime he may have had a Jewish ancestor. In "Yo, judío," a 1934 response to the supposed "outing" by the magazine *Crisol* of his "ascendencia judía maliciosamente ocultada," Borges laments that for as far back as he could trace his lineage he was unable to find evidence of Jewish ancestry: "Doscientos años y no doy con el israelita, doscientos años y el antepasado me elude." Despite this lack of genealogical evidence, as Borges discusses later in the article, he enjoys imagining his own Jewish antecedents in the "prehistory" of his lineage:

¿Quien no jugó a los antepasados alguna vez, a las prehistorias de su carne y su sangre? Yo lo hago muchas veces, y muchas no me disgusta pensarme judío. Se trata de una hipótesis haragana, de una aventura sedentaria y frugal que a nadie perjudica, ni siquiera a la fama de Israel, ya que mi judaísmo era sin palabras, como las canciones de Mendelssohn.

² See among many others Edna Aizenberg, "Emma Zunz: A Kabbalistic Heroine in Borges' Fiction", in *Studies in American Jewish Literature*, ed. Daniel Walden, 3 (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983), 223-235; Jaime Alazraki, "Borges and the Kabbalah", in *Prose for Borges*, ed. Charles Newman and Mary Kinzie (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974), 184-211; "El golem' de Jorge Luis Borges", in *Homenaje a Casaldueiro*, ed. Rizel Pincus Sigel y Gonzalo Sobejano (Madrid: Gredos, 1972), 9-19; Leonardo Senkman, "La cábala y el poder de la palabra", *Nuevos Aires*, núm. 9 (1972), 39-48.

In the first quatrain, the poetic voice “plays ancestors” exactly as described in “Yo, judío.” However, whereas Borges considers such fantasizing as a benign activity in “Yo, judío”—“a nadie perjudica”—in “A ISRAEL” it works to undermine the notion of Jewish racial difference.

The “Laberinto de ríos seculares / De mi sangre” describes through metaphor both the poetic voice’s vascular system as well as his familial blood lines. In depicting his descent as a labyrinth of rivers, the poetic voice emphasizes the near impossibility of tracing the rhizomatic assemblage of tributaries back to their source, pointing to the fact that one cannot exclude the possibility of Jewish ancestry with any degree of certainty. The labyrinth is a symbol found in several of Borges’s short stories, and as Donald L. Shaw explains, while they are in fact “bafflingly chaotic [they] have an appearance of regularity and order” (*Borges: Ficciones* 42). The second feature of the labyrinth according to Shaw “is the idea that they suggest a search for a hidden centre” (*Borges: Ficciones* 42). Both of these notions are present in the poem—the family tree’s specious appearance of regularity as one goes farther back in time, as well as the search for a hidden center, a transcendental meaning provided by knowledge of one’s blood lines. In an article from 1958, Borges explicitly challenges claims to blood purity in like manner, noting the “casi infinito y ciertamente incalculable azar de los tálamos” (“Testamento Argentino Israel” 1).

Employing the adjective “seculares,” or centuries-old, in describing his family lines or vascular system further undermines the concept of *limpieza de sangre*. It should be remembered that lineages untainted by Jewish ancestry were often described by means of the same metaphor of old blood. Thus, in pointing to the impossibility of knowing if his old blood, or pure Christian blood, does not have lost within it the supposed stain of Jewish blood, Borges undermines the binary opposition Christian / Jew, as he does elsewhere in “A ISRAEL.” In another poem from the collection *Elogio de la sombra*, “Israel, 1969,” Borges uses the same adjective “seculares” to describe the diaspora of the Jewish people: “la nostalgia que las diásporas seculares / acumularon como un triste tesoro.” The semantic association established between the age-old diaspora of the Jewish people and the old Christian blood of the poetic voice by repetition of the adjective “seculares” mirrors the consanguinity established in the first quatrain of “A ISRAEL” between Israel and the poetic voice’s lineage.

The remainder of the first quatrain repeats the question: “¿Quién los lugares / Que mi sangre y tu sangre han recorrido?” Thus, the first quatrain is a moment in which the poetic voice wonders aloud about the possible presence of Jewish ancestry among his progenitors while subverting the ideology of Jewish difference.

After asking the two rhetorical questions which are really one and the same, the poetic voice begins the second quatrain by obviating them, stating “No importa.” The brevity of the pronouncement clashes against the length of the two previous thoughts, the first of which runs without pause for two-and-a-half lines, the second for over one line. The poetic voice’s moment of fantasizing about past ancestry comes to an abrupt stop, and the question’s irrelevance is highlighted. The actual presence or absence of

Jewish ancestry cannot be proven nor can it be disproved. Therefore, endeavors such as the fabrication of family trees that affirm the absence of Jewish blood are inutile, and “don’t matter.”

As Borges explains in “Testamento Argentino Israel”:

Más allá de las aventuras de la sangre, más allá del casi infinito y ciertamente incalculable azar de los tálamos, toda persona occidental es griega y judía. [...] Sugieren [los hechos] que más allá de aversiones o preferencias, de filosemitismo o antisemitismo, somos irreparablemente judíos y griegos o, si se quiere, judíos helenísticos. Modificar esa determinación secular no depende de nuestro arbitrio. (1-2)

In this publication commemorating the ten-year anniversary of the founding of the State of Israel, Borges discusses the unfeasibility of tracing succession in the same manner as it is put forward in the first quatrain of “A ISRAEL.” Of true import, Borges explains here and elsewhere, is that Jewish culture is “an integral element of our so-called Western civilization” (“Autobiographical Essay” 257). This is the subject of the second quatrain of “A ISRAEL.”

While the labyrinth of forebears is untraceable, what is known by the poetic voice, “Sé,” is that Israel is in the sacred Book, the Bible. Borges’s paternal grandmother, a protestant, read the Bible, and as Borges explains:

yo llegué muy pronto a ese venero, ese manantial, porque una de mis abuelas era inglesa y sabía la Biblia de memoria. Alguien citaba una sentencia bíblica y ella daba inmediatamente el capítulo y el versículo. Como yo me he criado dentro de la lengua castellana y dentro de la lengua inglesa, la Biblia entró en mí muy tempranamente. (“Los primeros 25 años de Davar”)

The Bible, antecedent to Western culture and morality, is, in the eyes of Borges, essentially Hebrew, and is therefore one more source of Borges’s philo-Semitism (Aizenberg 21). As Aizenberg explains, Borges held the Bible in high regard, calling it “el punto de partida de todo,” the basis of Western ethics and a fundamental text of Western literature (21-22). According to the poem, the book takes in all of time, and rescues the history and memory of Adam and of Jesus. Adam is described here in the second quatrain as red. In Hebrew the name Adam and the word for red, *adom*, share the same root, *adam*. Ground, *adomah*, has this root as well. Adam is made in Genesis 2:7 from the red, arable soil, from *adomah*, and from here he gets his name Adam. The connection in the poem between the color red and Adam again demonstrates Borges’s knowledge of scripture, of Judaic exegesis, and of Kabbalah. The slight hyperbaton of this section, “y que la historia / Del rojo Adan rescata,” obligates the reader to slow down in order to fully comprehend the lines. In spending more time here reconstructing the disordered syntax, the reader is impelled to contemplate the linkage between Adam and Jesus, between the Old Testament and the New, between Jews and Christians. Again, the supposed binary opposites Jew and Christian are connected, now through the common foundation of the Bible. Borges discusses Christianity’s Hebrew origin

similarly in “Definición del germanófilo,” as well as in the essay “Testamento Argentino Israel” in which he writes: “El orbe occidental es cristiano; el sentido de esta afirmación es que somos una rama del judaísmo” (1).

The second quatrain thus presents an answer to the question posed in the first—while the poetic voice cannot know with any certainty whether or not he has Jewish ancestry, it is of no import. Of real significance, according to the poetic voice, is Judaism’s role as a constitutive element of Western culture and of Christianity.

The first tercet’s “En ese libro estás” again displays Borges’s conception of the Bible as being an essentially Hebrew book (Aizenberg 21). After the mid-line caesura, the Bible is described through metaphor as “el espejo / De cada rostro de Dios.” The Bible is a mirror, a text through which man can perceive himself and judge his actions and his morality. As the Bible is the mirror of each face—not just Jewish faces—Borges demonstrates the Hebrew Bible to be the basis of Western ethics. Borges includes all of humankind in this line. Hence all faces, including those of Israel, are of God, both emanating from God and made in His likeness, as we read in Genesis 1:27. The connection that this line establishes between Israel and God combats the Catholic discourse that configures the Jews as lacking a vital connection to God, a perspective based on Agustin’s *Civitas Dei* (18:46).

The mirror is complex and difficult (“que en su complejo / Y arduo cristal”). Judaism is not a simple religion, but one that is “complex and difficult,” requiring years of study in order to unlock its mysteries. When fully understood these mysteries can be unbearably powerful; reading them is terrible (“terrible se adivina”). In Exodus 33:20 God tells Moses that he cannot look upon his face, for no man can look upon the face of God and live. The book described in this tercet as a complex and difficult mirror through which one perceives one’s true face, which is that of God, recalls the Aleph glimpsed by the protagonist of Borges’s story *El Aleph*:

Cada cosa (la luna del espejo, digamos) era infinitas cosas [...] vi interminables ojos inmediatos escrutándose en mí como en un espejo, vi todos los espejos del planeta y ninguno me reflejó, [...] vi mi cara y mis vísceras, vi tu cara, y sentí vértigo y lloré, porque mis ojos habían visto ese objeto secreto y conjetural, cuyo nombre usurpan los hombres, pero que ningún hombre ha mirado: el inconcebible universo. (*Narraciones* 190).

The poem’s last two lines, which as discussed above lack a third with which to complete a traditional sonnet’s two tercets or sestet, offer a prayer that Israel be saved. “Salve,” or “Hail” is an exclamation of respectful or reverent salutation that is used, for example, in the Salve Regina or Hail Mary prayer, made use of in the Roman Catholic Church in invocation of the Virgin. Here, Judaism and Catholicism are again mixed, another questioning of the commonsense thinking of their oppositional positions. “Hail, Israel,” proclaims the poetic voice, because in the passion of its battle it guards the wall of God. These lines can be read literally, as during the 1967 Six-Day War battle raged around Jerusalem’s Old City, which is surrounded by walls. Figuratively the lines can relate to the people of Israel’s battle for survival, a people who are so intimately

connected to God that their battle for existence is the very battle protecting God's kingdom.

In the week following Israel's victory in the Six-Day War Borges composed the poem "ISRAEL." The poem first appeared in *Davar*, number 114, July-September 1967, and was republished in *Elogio de la sombra* (1969) immediately following "A ISRAEL." "ISRAEL" consists of twenty-four lines that lack rhyme and whose syllable count varies. The free-verse poem, nevertheless, has an abundance of eleven and seven syllable lines, which suggests it is a modified silva.

ISRAEL

Un hombre encarcelado y hechizado,
un hombre condenado a ser la serpiente
que guarda un oro infame,
un hombre condenado a ser Shylock,
un hombre que se inclina sobre la tierra
y que sabe que estuvo en el Paraíso,
un hombre viejo y ciego que ha de romper
las columnas del templo,
un rostro condenado a ser una máscara,
un hombre que a pesar de los hombres
es Spinoza y el Baal Shem y los cabalistas,
un hombre que es el Libro,
una boca que alaba desde el abismo
la justicia del firmamento,
un procurador o un dentista
que dialogó con Dios en una montaña,
un hombre condenado a ser el escarnio,
la abominación, el judío,
un hombre lapidado, incendiado
y ahogado en cámaras letales,
un hombre que se obstina en ser inmortal
y que ahora ha vuelto a su batalla,
a la violenta luz de la victoria,
hermoso como un león al mediodía. (OC 997)

"ISRAEL" begins with the words "Un hombre." Borges's masculine subject demonstrates his agreement with Sander Gilman that it is the male Jew and his representation in the West that "lies at the very heart of Western Jew-hatred" (5). Moreover, while anti-Semitic *topoi* have worked to dehumanize the Jew, as witnessed in Nazi propaganda *par excellence*, the poetic voice immediately signals the fact that the poem's referent is a man—a human being. Borges attacked Nazi anti-Semitism that dehumanized the Jew in the pages of *El Hogar* and *Sur*, in articles such as "Una pedagogía del odio" (1937). The first line continues to relate to the reader that the man is jailed and bewitched. Jewish incarceration has been commonplace since well before the Spanish Inquisition began in 1478; its apogee taking place during Borges's lifetime in the Nazi concentration camps. We are informed that the Jew has been made into a

witch, a heretic. This begins the poem's description of the Jew's demonization. In enumerating the medieval and modern infernalizations of the Jew, the poem "ISRAEL" is quite distinct from "A ISRAEL," which as we saw above is addressed to the collective people "Israel," whom the poem links through metaphor and symbol to the biblical Hebrews.

The poem's second line begins as did the last, "un hombre"; the anaphora mirroring the Jew's aeonian condemnations. Repetition of "un hombre" followed by the enumeration of yet another condemnation, two features that continue throughout the poem, communicates the excessive punishment received by the Jew, a feeling emphasized through the absence in the poem of any crime committed, other than that revealed by the third line's adjective clause, "que guarda un oro infame." The punishment seems to outweigh the supposed crime of avarice, an enduring anti-Semitic myth, described metonymically here. Usage of the past participle throughout the poem—encarcelado, hechizado, condenado, etc.—further denotes the Jew's passive, even nonexistent role in his vilification. Much of the poem repeats the structure of these first three lines: two lines (one in the second half of the poem) that begin with "un hombre," followed by "condenado a ser," a specific anti-Semitic stereotype, and then a line that is an adjective clause. This parallelism, like the anaphora of "un hombre" and repetition of "condenado," furthers the poem's message of the Jew's ceaseless victimization.

The metaphoric condemnation to be a serpent referred to in the second line alludes to God's damnation of the serpent in Genesis 3:14, "upon thy belly shalt thou go, and dust shalt thou eat all the days of thy life." This is the punishment received for beguiling Eve into eating from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. The Jew is condemned to be a serpent, which captures the history of the Jewish people throughout the diaspora, unable to walk upright with head held high, but instead hunched over, humbly hoping to go unnoticed for fear of abuse. The comparison with the serpent from Genesis also captures anti-Semitism's characterization of the Jew, as both serpent and notional Jew are cunningly deceitful, their craftiness mesmerizing their victims, striking without warning. Further, the serpent in the Garden of Eden is identified with Satan. Therefore the line also suggests the pervasive trope of Jew as Devil, evidenced for example in that rich archive of Jewish demonology, *The Merchant of Venice*: "the Jew [...] is the devil himself. Certainly, the Jew is the very devil incarnation" (88).

Shakespeare's influential depiction of the vile, despicable, money-lending Jew Shylock is referred to by Borges in the next line of "ISRAEL." Shylock has proven to be one of the most pervasive Jewish figures in modernity (see Gross). Imaginary Jewish usury has been an influential catalyst of modern anti-Semitism, as has historical medieval Jewish money-lending. Usury, one of the only careers open to Jews during the medieval epoch, often led to the massacre of Jews, such as in London and York in 1189-90.

The poem's next two lines ("un hombre que se inclina sobre la tierra / y que sabe que estuvo en el Paraíso") echo the second line ("un hombre condenado a ser la

serpiente”). The man is inclined or bent over the earth as he attempts to go unnoticed. The line may just as well refer to the man’s age, his elderliness resulting in his stooped posture. In Borges’s “Autobiographical Essay,” he recounts his visit to Israel in 1969, in which he states, “I brought home with me the conviction of having been in the oldest and the youngest of nations” (257). The Jew is old enough to have been present at the Garden of Eden, a member of the “oldest of nations.” This reading is confirmed by the seventh line, “un hombre viejo y ciego que ha de romper / las columnas del templo.” The reference here is to the story of Samson in Judges 16. After Delilah finds out the secret to Samson’s strength, his hair, she shaves his head, which allows the Philistines to capture him. They blind him and chain him to two pillars, which he pulls down, killing himself along with the Philistines that are torturing him. The Jew is tortured like Samson. Also like Samson, the Jew, despite his weakened state, will return to battle in the poem’s concluding lines.

In the ninth line we read that the man is “un rostro condenado a ser una máscara,” which relates how the Jew has most often had to practice his faith in secret while donning the façade of Christianity, exemplified by the crypto-Jews of Spain and the New World. The poem’s next three lines signal a shift in content. Whereas the first nine lines of the poem contain only condemnations, beginning in the tenth line and continuing until the seventeenth is a section of the poem that praises the Jew. Through Vossian antonomasia, the poetic voice notes that despite his persecution at the hands of other men—the anti-Semitism reiteratively suffered in the first section of “ISRAEL”—the Jew has been able to acquire wisdom: “un hombre que a pesar de los hombres / es Spinoza y el Baal Shem y los cabalistas, / un hombre que es el Libro.” Aizenberg writes: “El judío como intelecto es una de las metáforas judías más importantes en Borges. Un examen de sus obras revela que, en buena medida, el judío es para él el Libro, la encarnación de la vida mental” (128). The ability of Jewish mental life to thrive in the face of Jew-hatred that these three lines posit is found elsewhere in Borges’s oeuvre, and is exemplified in “El milagro secreto.” “Spinoza” refers to Baruch or Benedict de Spinoza (1632-1677), the Dutch philosopher of Jewish origin. Borges mentions or discusses Spinoza in several essays, poems, and short stories. As Efraín Kristal makes clear, Borges may have struggled against some of Spinoza’s thinking, but he was nonetheless both influenced and in admiration of the philosopher’s humility and dedication to the integrity of his ideas. “Baal Shem” references Israel ben Eliezer (1698-1760), the Rabbi who founded Hasidic Judaism and was called the Baal Shem Tov. He was thought to have rediscovered the pronunciation of the Tetragrammaton, the four letter name of God, which was lost with the destruction of the second Temple by the Romans in the year 70 C.E. Baal Shem Tov means “Master of the Good Name,” referring to God’s name, which ben Eliezer, according to some accounts, was able to use to work miracles. The line “un hombre que es el Libro” signals the Jew as archetype of the intellectual, a commonplace in Borges’s work (Aizenberg 128-129).

The thirteenth and fourteenth lines celebrate the man’s courage, who while suffering in the depths of the abyss still praises God’s justice: “una boca que alaba desde el abismo / la justicia del firmamento”. As Shaw points out, physical and moral courage, both of which are displayed in this line, are two values that, despite his

skepticism, Borges did not doubt (“Jorge Luis Borges” 134). The next line (“un procurador o un dentista”) displays the fact that Jews are normal, everyday people, who defy the stereotypes listed earlier. Stavans explains that in “Deutches Requiem” Borges attempts to convey the “sense that people are not as different from one another as they might believe themselves to be” (“A Comment on Borges’s Response to Hitler” 8). Borges’s reevaluation of the Jew continues in the sixteenth line, stating that this man, now hated and condemned by mankind, is someone who God deemed worthy enough to have spoken with: “que dialogó con Dios en una montaña”. This is a reference to Exodus 19, in which Moses ascends Mount Sinai, where he talks with God and receives the Ten Commandments. Borges discussed the Jew’s conversation with God similarly in “Testamento Argentino Israel”:

Podríamos decir que Israel no sólo es una entonación, un exilio, unos rasgos faciales; una ironía, una fatigada dulzura, una voluntad, un fuego y un canto; es también una humillación y una exaltación, un haber dialogado con Dios, un sentir de un modo patético la tierra, el agua, el pan, el tiempo, la soledad, la misteriosa culpa, las tardes y el hecho de ser padre o ser hijo. (2)

The seventeenth line ends the section of praise and returns to a series of obloquys, similar to the poem’s first nine lines, although the asyndeton present here quickens the pace and intensifies the enumeration of condemnations as we approach the poem’s climax, the naming of the man: “un hombre condenado a ser el escarnio, / la abominación, el judío.” This is the first instance in the poem in which there is a caesura mid-line, which calls attention to the words “el judío.” The result of the man’s voluminous demonizations is his judaicization. He is made into “the Jew,” the scapegoat through whom society exorcises its fears and anxieties. After this moment of intensity in which the man is finally named, and in which he loses his humanity and is converted into “el judío,” derisions are replaced with executions (“un hombre lapidado, incendiado / y ahogado en cámaras letales,”). The forms of murder are enumerated in chronological order, from biblical times (stoning), to early modernity’s *auto-da-fe* (burning), and then to the Nazi’s extermination camps (gas chambers). The Jew has been hunted throughout history, a protracted genocide almost completed in the “cámaras letales” of Nazi Germany’s *Endlösung der Judenfrage* (final solution to the Jewish question).

Nonetheless, the man, old enough to remember having been in the Garden of Eden, is obstinate in being immortal, as the twenty-first line explains. This recalls Stavans’s reading of the short story “El milagro secreto”: “It is clear, to me at least, that in the face of tyranny and death [Borges] understood what Jews in Europe were about: faith, endurance, and posterity” (“A Comment on Borges’s Response to Hitler” 7). These lines also evoke the first lines of Borges’s poem “Rafael Cansinos-Asséns” from *El otro, el mismo* (1964), which also depicts the Jewish people: “La imagen de aquel pueblo lapidado / Y execrado, inmortal en su agonía.” Here, “ISRAEL” introduces a new section and there is a type of *volta*. The Jew is no longer passive, but persists in being immortal. Now he refuses to be hunted, and instead gives battle, as the twenty-second line explains: “y que ahora ha vuelto a su batalla.” Up until this moment, the Jew has been condemned to torture and misery, the victim of anti-Semitism, pogroms, and gas chambers. These lines are quite different; they are vibrating with energy and courage.

The alliteration of the “v” in “vuelto,” “violenta,” and “victoria” captures this vibration, this newfound energy—they buzz like the sound of battle, of arrows or of bullets whizzing by. The bright light of victory is “hermoso como un león al mediodía.” Lions are discussed in the Bible in relation to their strength (Judges 14:18), boldness (2 Samuel 17:10), ferocity (Psalms 7:2), and stealth (Psalms 10:9; Lamentations 3:10).³ The brightness, beauty, and strength of the image of a lion in the midday sun concludes the poem dedicated to Israel in a highly positive way that contrasts sharply with the Jew’s past opprobrium, abuse, and murder discussed throughout the poem.

The Jew’s eternal demonization and struggle for survival is communicated in “ISRAEL” through a clarity of language and symbols; there are no enigmas, no challenging conceits, no use of hyperbaton. As Borges explains in the prologue to *Elogio de la sombra*, “El tiempo me ha enseñado algunas astucias: eludir los sinónimos, que tienen la desventaja de sugerir diferencias imaginarias; eludir hispanismos, argentinismos, arcaísmos y neologismos; preferir las palabras habituales a las palabras asombrosas” (9). The sonnet “A ISRAEL,” likewise presents a clear message—an appreciation and felt connection to the state of Israel.

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