

## Article

# Migration, Exile, and Vocation in the Metropol: The Figure of Joseph in the Early Writings of Léon Askenazi

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**Abstract:** This paper considers the relationship between exile and migration as reflected in a case study of biblical exegesis in modern Jewish thought. I consider the place of the biblical figure of Joseph in an early text by Léon Askenazi (also known as Manitou), a North African kabbalist and French intellectual, and a key spiritual leader of Francophone Jewry in the second half of the twentieth century. The paper begins by locating Askenazi within the mass migration, or “repatriation”, of the Algerian Jewish community to metropolitan France. I then examine and analyze the reinterpretation of Joseph in an early and unpublished text by Askenazi. I show how Askenazi’s explication departs from a common reading of the Joseph story by recasting it as a positive diasporic narrative with direct contemporary implications. I argue that during Askenazi’s early years in Paris, he sought to offer a “Josephic” model for Jewish life in postwar France, a model which also functioned as an alternative to the Zionist ethos of the negation of exile. The paper’s conclusion reflects on how Askenazi’s ideas may speak to conversations on religion and immigration.

**Keywords:** Léon Askenazi; Jacob Gordin; hermeneutics; Algeria; Jewish thought; postwar France; Jewish diasporism; Zionism; Post-Holocaust (post-Shoah) theology; critique of secularism



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## 1. Narratives of Migration and Exile

If migration is the generic and neutral term for geographical movement and change, then exile would be a specific class of migration. Migrating birds are not described as going into exile, even if many of them may never return to the place where they hatched before the migrating season. Migrating persons, however, may describe their movement as exile or it may be described in this way by others. Often, there is not a single descriptor of the migrating experience, be it individual or collective. Rather, there are multiple and even competing narratives on the meaning of a given migration. Such narratives may be produced by various actors, such as the individuals or groups themselves, their social circles, the media, as well as civil, state, and international institutions and authorities.

One example of several conflicting migration narratives concerns the mass movement of the majority of Algerian Jewry to France during the 1950s and 1960s (Sussman 2002; cf. Slyomovics and Stein 2012). This migration was part of a broader movement of nearly one million people holding French citizenship from Algeria to the Metropole, corresponding with the end of the French–Algerian war and Algerian independence. This post-colonial event consisted of the “repatriation” to France, as it became officially called by French authorities, of hundreds of thousands of “Pieds-Noirs (literally, black feet)”, a term describing the population of European descent who settled Algeria under French encouragement during more than a century of direct French rule. Side by side with these settler populations moving “back” to the imaginary motherland, there were also a hundred thousand Algerian Jews, who made more than two thirds of the entire Algerian Jewish community. In a certain way, this immigration of most of the Jewish community from Algeria to France was a post-colonial anomaly: the Jews were as indigenous to Algeria, if not more, than their majority Muslim brethren who remained there, the Jewish community having been present in North Africa at least as early as the times of the Roman Empire.<sup>1</sup> However, unlike

Alegria's Muslim majority, who were only granted citizenship in 1947, most Jews in Algeria were granted French citizenship already in 1870. By the early 1960s, recent memories of persecution under Vichy coupled with growing Muslim–Jewish tensions in Algeria (which, in turn, were also related to the Arab–Israeli conflict in the Middle East) contributed to decisions by the majority of this native non-Muslim population to move en masse to France. They did this with the tacit support of French officials, who, in the Evian Accords between the French government and the Algerian National Liberation Front (FNL), retained the legal status of Algerian Jews as French citizens. Consequently, the migration of Algerian Jews to France occurred alongside the larger migration of a predominantly Christian and European settler population who, generally speaking, held strong anti-Jewish views (cf. Shepard 2006, especially pp. 169–82; Katz 2015).

According to official and popular French political discourse, then, the migration of Jews from Algeria was but a repatriation, a positive return of French citizens back to the mainland, which allegedly had nothing to do with their group identity. Clearly, the very choice of the term “repatriation” allowed for the playing down of the geopolitical and even moral reasons for this migration. A complementary way to describe this migration could point to the rational reasons for such a choice by Algerian Jews, for example, to move to a place where they will not be persecuted for their ethno-religious identity, where they are familiar with the language and culture, and where they would have better occupational opportunities and reasonable hopes for higher standards of living. Arguably, however, from a traditional Jewish perspective, there was nothing more farfetched than describing this migration as repatriation. From this Jewish perspective, such a mass uprooting of a community who lived in North Africa for more than two millennia represented yet another manifestation of Jewish exile.<sup>2</sup>

In Judaism, Exile (*Galut*), taken on a collective level, signifies a fundamental condition of Jews as a dispersed entity, characterized by low social, political, and religious status, and leading frequently to suffering (cf. Eisen 2009; Mendes-Flohr 2020). Traditionally, the reason for this state of Jewish existence was perceived as an ongoing consequence of a broken relationship between God and the children of Israel, marked in moral and arguably theological terms. This approach is captured in a key section of the liturgy uttered by worshipers on Jewish holidays, which states that, “Because of our sins we were exiled from our land” (cf. Antebi et al. 2002, pp. 782–83). These sins, amply discussed in rabbinic literature, are seen as the ultimate cause for Jewish exile. They are understood to have brought about punitive action by God; and the resolution of this temporary state will similarly involve action from God. Accordingly, in the aforementioned liturgical passage, worshippers beseech God to “return and have mercy on us and on your temple. . . and return us joyfully to Zion your city and to Jerusalem your temple in happiness that will last forever” (cf. Antebi et al. 2002, pp. 782–83). Until that happy time, exile, by and large, is a negative condition of Jewish life, with an almost indefinite time frame. From this perspective, when applied to the case of Algerian Jewry, the “repatriation” of Jews to France was but another instantiation of a long and sorrowful aspect of Jewish history.

Admittedly, the conflation of narratives that I have briefly presented is not central to the everyday life of most immigrants. Surely, more pressing needs of everyday survival take precedence over reflection on the meaning of individual or collective experience. Still, such meaning is sought after, even if only at times of respite. Arguably, at least within the religious fabric of North African Jewry, the providers of meaning were often rabbis and spiritual leaders. Accordingly, in this paper I will discuss an element of this search for meaning in exile and migration as expressed in an early work by Léon Askenazi (also known as Manitou), a North African, Algerian Jewish émigré to France and one of the spiritual leaders of Francophone Jewry in the second half of the twentieth century. Following a biographical sketch of Askenazi, I will discuss an early draft of Askenazi's exegetical writings in relation to the questions of exile and the meaning of Jewish presence in postwar France. I will focus on the explication of the figure of biblical Joseph in Askenazi's

thought and locate Askenazi's treatment of Joseph in its broader theological and ideological contexts.

## 2. Léon Askenazi

Rav Yehouda Léon Askenazi (1922–1996) was born in Oran, Algeria, to a family of rabbis who traced their lineage to a disciple of the great kabbalist Isaac Luria of Safed.<sup>3</sup> Askenazi arrived in Paris shortly after the war, having served as a military chaplain in Charles de Gaulle's Free France Army during the campaign to liberate France. In Paris, Askenazi completed academic training in philosophy and ethnology at the Sorbonne. At the same time, he also enrolled in a new institution for young leadership established by the French-Jewish Scouts (Les Eclaireurs israélites de France, henceforth EIF), called the Gilbert Bloch School (École Gilbert-Bloch), located in the Parisian suburb of Orsay (Benguigui 2009). At Orsay, Askenazi studied with the Russian-Jewish émigré philosopher and scholar Jacob Gordin (1896–1947). Gordin introduced Askenazi to an affirmative approach to Jewish thought, which emphasized conceptual independence and intellectual rigor. Gordin also imparted to Askenazi a positive view of a diasporic Judaism and a related set of theologically inspired reservations regarding Zionist ideology.

Following his arrival in the Metropol, Askenazi became deeply involved in the postwar renewal of French Judaism, later holding leadership and educational positions in the Gilbert Bloch school, the Jewish student union, the EIF, and the Parisian University Center for Jewish Studies (CUEJ). Askenazi's mastery of Talmudic and kabbalistic sources, familiarity with contemporary French thought, personal charisma, and oratorical skills led to his rise as a central figure in postwar French Jewry. Accordingly, he is considered a key member in the group of thinkers called the Paris School of Jewish Thought (École de Pensée Juive de Paris), which included figures such as Emmanuel Levinas, Eliane Amado Lévy-Valensi, and André Neher (Trigano and Tiar 1997; Banon 2017). Following Israel's victory in the war in 1967, Askenazi and his family immigrated to Israel. Having become by then an ardent Zionist, Askenazi established francophone institutions of Jewish education in Jerusalem. At the same time, he continued to be deeply involved in the lives of French-speaking Jewish communities across the world. Askenazi also retained and further developed his engagement in interfaith activity adding dialogue with the Muslim African world to the predominantly European-based Jewish–Christian dialogue that was his focus while in France. Askenazi passed away in Jerusalem in 1996 (Goldmann 1999).

## 3. Exile and Exegesis after the Shoah (Holocaust) and the Second World War

Askenazi's formative period as a Jewish thinker coincided with the two decades immediately following the Second World War. As such, he was faced by a multidimensional crisis. In France, Jewish community workers and leaders had to attend to the pressing everyday needs of French and non-French Jewish refugees, including many orphans and survivors of Nazi work and death camps. In addition, they had to rebuild, physically and organizationally, the welfare, religious, and educational institutions of the French-Jewish community. On the interrelated spiritual and emotional side, leaders were asked to address implicit and explicit questions on the meaning of continued Jewish existence. In this demanding situation, the task of thinkers immersed in the Jewish tradition was to engage a constituency that was highly educated in French-European culture but illiterate, if not completely ignorant, in Jewish mores and ideas. Faced by this challenge, Askenazi chose to approach Jewish thought by way of scriptural exegesis, informed by rabbinic sources as well as kabbalistic literature and traditions. In articles he published and many lectures he delivered across France, Askenazi formulated his political and historical claims as emerging out of commentaries on biblical text. In doing so, Askenazi made biblical and rabbinic texts directly intervene in contemporary intellectual conversations.<sup>4</sup>

Throughout his lifetime Askenazi taught on many issues, including the weekly Torah portions read in the synagogue, and the meaning and content of Jewish liturgy. He is best known for his systematic hermeneutical approach to the biblical narrative, aimed to

generate an account of a Jewish philosophy of history, which Askenazi eventually called the teachings of “*Engendrements*”. This French semi-neologism, in the way in which Askenazi deployed it, may be rendered as “birthings” or “begettings”. It captured Askenazi’s mode of applying typological interpretation to biblical narratives, particularly in the book of Genesis. For Askenazi, the Genesis narrative documents an all-human effort to reach an advanced moral capability, a moral level with direct consequences that include peace as the default condition of interhuman relationships. In this view, the Genesis stories, focused on successive members in a biological–spiritual lineage beginning from biblical Adam and ending with the children of Jacob-Israel, are characterized by consecutive personal moral trials that the biblical protagonists undergo. Each successful biblical hero or heroes face the challenge of inheriting and retaining the acquired moral level of their predecessors and standing their own distinct trial. In turn, as fathers or mothers, the protagonists also strive to “engender” children that will continue and carry on the intergenerational moral torch. From the authoritative perspective of the Jewish tradition, Askenazi insisted, this meaning of the Genesis story is also contemporarily applicable. In Askenazi’s view, Genesis delineates a still unfinished all-human moral project, with Judaism at the avant-garde, and whose culmination will be brought about through the ushering of a messianic age of world peace (cf. [Askenazi 1973](#)).<sup>5</sup>

As a grand mythical theory of history which put Judaism at its center, Askenazi’s *Engendrements* is vulnerable to triumphalist interpretations that may take Askenazi’s emphasis on Judaism’s universal moral heritage for a claim regarding Jewish superiority. To counter such readings, in my view, it is helpful to consider Askenazi’s historical context and audience. Askenazi’s listeners, especially in the first postwar decades, consisted of French youth whose Jewish identity was marked by the Shoah—namely, by the fact that they, their families, and their community were hunted down and murdered for the sheer reason of being identified as Jews. For these youth, Askenazi offered a positive account of Judaism, which emphasized its continued relevance in a secularizing European society, as a source of universal ethical and spiritual values. An analysis of the assertive elements in Askenazi’s teachings, therefore, may contribute to studies of resistance to cultural domination, in this case by an elite member of the persecuted Jewish North African and European minority. In this perspective, Askenazi operated under what Susannah Heschel described, in the context of 19th century German Jewish intellectuals, as an internal colonial situation (cf. [Heschel 1999](#)). Accordingly, Askenazi’s explication of the biblical figure of Joseph stands as a central example of his constructed message for Jews in postwar France, taking into account and responding to their conditions in a post-Shoah era.

#### 4. Joseph in Exile/in Migration

Askenazi’s private archive contains an unfinished and unpublished text by Askenazi, which I consider to be the earliest available presentation of Askenazi’s *Engendrements*. The text is extant in typescript form, and I estimate its time of composition to have been between the late 1940s and the mid-1950s. Titled “Loi Juive et Loi Scoute [Jewish Law and Scout law, henceforth LJLS],” the text may be described as an advanced draft for an extended educational pamphlet, composed in a first-person voice and without references or citations.<sup>6</sup> It addresses members of the French-Jewish scout movement (EIF), to whom Askenazi offers a retelling of the entirety of the Genesis story from Adam and Eve to the arrival of Jacob and his family in Egypt. This retelling is constructed around key verses and events that Askenazi explicates. In LJLS, the Genesis story is framed as a narrative leading to the Sinai revelation, wherein Judaism received its divine law. In other words, as Askenazi indicates in the introduction to LJLS, the Genesis narrative as a story of humanity’s moral progress reaches its highest point with the reception, by the children of Israel, of a divine moral law (the Torah).

Most pertinent for my current discussion is a key notion that Askenazi utilizes when treating the stories of the biblical patriarchs, especially Abraham. Askenazi describes the spiritual vocation of the patriarchs as a continuous and increasing occupation of the

function of “priests of humanity”.<sup>7</sup> Askenazi does not offer a detailed account of what being a priest for the world entails. His discussion in LJLS suggests that it signifies the exercising of an educational and ethical role within general society, while at the same time investing in the conservation of a distinct spiritual identity. Important biblical figures who exemplify this “priestly” function include Abraham, Jacob, and finally, Joseph. Notably, in this early iteration of Askenazi’s views, the figure of Joseph that concludes Askenazi’s text also stands out as the central role model for contemporary Judaism. Askenazi introduces Joseph in LSLS as standing in a relation of continuation and contrast to his father, Jacob. Jacob was a person of study and dwelling in tents “by vocation” (cf. Genesis 25:27). Joseph, on the other hand, was a “man of action”.<sup>8</sup> Askenazi describes Joseph as displaying a “royal” personality already in his youth, and, correspondingly, as the ultimate leader of Jacob’s children he was tasked with two missions. The first, particularly oriented, was to unite his family, the children of Jacob-Israel. The second was a universal mission to redeem the “Egyptian civilization”.<sup>9</sup> Despite sensing Joseph’s royal abilities, Askenazi continues, his brothers did not recognize him as such, and he would have been killed by them if not for the intervention of his brother Reuben. After being sold as a slave and brought to Egypt, Joseph escaped from his lowly condition thanks to his abilities of “divination”.<sup>10</sup> Having predicted a famine and also suggested means by which to avoid it, Joseph would become a “viceroy”, and “soon after, he would be called by the Egyptians: ‘savior of the world.’”<sup>11</sup> It is here, where Askenazi elaborates on Joseph’s role as a universal savior, that he discusses exile and introduces a surprisingly positive meaning into this otherwise negative concept. The following quote, from the very last paragraphs of LJLS, contains Askenazi’s exegetical summary of Genesis 45:28–50:26:

In the end, all of Joseph’s family, including his father, descended into Egypt, into exile. This Galut is a trial preceding the giving of the Torah and one of the sites of Israel’s mission. What Israel has understood, has accomplished, he should not egoistically keep for himself but must turn it to the exterior and profit others by his discoveries. This is one of the meanings of exile. And so, Joseph entered Egypt and once established in this country he put all his knowledge at the service of the person who was at risk of dying from hunger, the Egyptian at that moment. Then the twelve tribes and Jacob arrived. There had to be in effect a whole people who will prove that they can be capable of such a task. We will have to see in what follows for which reasons did Israel and Egypt not both enjoy what they could have achieved together, and how Israel became subjugated by Egypt. In any case, whatever was the result, we need to understand well what the history of Joseph teaches us: Like Abraham, who brought his spiritual, moral conquests to the service of humanity from his open tent, responding and teaching to all from where they came, so also was Joseph. Without betraying the laws of his people, Joseph put himself to the service of the other, in order to assist them in solving their problems, this time economic ones. From Abraham to Joseph (from 1900 to 1600 BCE) Israel’s role became more and more precise and diversified according to personalities. 400 years afterward [namely, at the time of exodus from Egypt] each person in Israel had a common and well-defined heritage—the Torah—no matter what the role that they then individually chose to play, according to their personality. Joseph seems in this way to prefigure a type of person in Israel, the one who, in exile, in Galut, remains loyal to the Torah (to what for him was already a certain Torah), refuses to assimilate, and equally refuses to cut himself off from the problems of his country of residence.<sup>12</sup>

Already as a commentary, Askenazi’s interpretation of the Joseph story as a decisive pattern of the positive meaning of Jewish exile, departs from more common readings of this episode. Arguably, a reader of the plain level (*peshat*) of the Joseph story would see in it the hands of God, or, from a non-theist perspective, a dramatic story of arbitrary fate. This type of reader will certainly not observe the grand teleological meaning with which Askenazi invests the story. In the biblical account, Joseph is a passive actor during his childhood,

where he suffers at the hands of his hateful brothers (Genesis 37). Joseph later becomes an efficient slave-servant in the house of the Egyptian Potiphara, yet he continues to be a slave who is thrown into prison at his masters' will, albeit following an active decision not to cheat on his master with the latter's wife (Genesis 39). Joseph's full agency seems to emerge only once he is called from the prison to decipher Pharaoh's dream and is suddenly promoted to manager of the Egyptian preparations for the famine he predicted (Genesis 40). Later, from his newly acquired ruling position, once Joseph's brothers appear in Egypt, he subjugates them to a challenging ordeal before a final reconciliation (Genesis 42–45). In contrast, in the quoted passage from Askenazi's text, Joseph is reported as "entering" Egypt under no constraints or persecutions, and with a clear and grandiose objective. This objective is to act as a leader of a whole nation that is destined to save Egypt.

As a homiletical piece, or, to use the rabbinic term, as a midrash, Askenazi seems to be offering a maximalist interpretation of Genesis 45:5–8 and Genesis 50:20. These verses contain the meaning which Joseph himself imputed to his ordeals in the biblical narrative. Speaking to his brothers in the episodes of their reconciliation, Joseph claimed that while his brothers' intentions had been negative, their actions manifested God's plan, which was a positive plan for his whole family: "Although you thought evil against me, God meant it for good, to bring it to pass at this day that a great people [*am rav*] should be saved" (Genesis 50:20, translation based on Sefaria 2024). A common reading of this verse may see the "people" under discussion as Joseph's family, which would soon become the people of Israel. Askenazi's reading, however, takes the "people" in the verse to denote all the many peoples in Egypt. In this way, Askenazi transforms a potential particularist reading of Joseph's view of his own life and vocation into a universalist one.

Accordingly, if we represent Joseph's words anachronistically in terms of our discussion of migration, Joseph seems to offer a religious narrative which imbues his years of forced migration and suffering as an individual with a deeper meaning of a divine mission to save his whole family. Instead of a lonely refugee, Joseph presents himself as a migrant worker who did so well as to bring his whole family with him to the new prosperous land. To continue this loose analogy, Askenazi's reading goes one step further: it suggests that the purpose of Joseph's migration is to save his new country, and even more so, all of humanity.

### 5. Affirmation vs. Negation of Exile

Returning to the quoted exposition in LJLS, a central aspect of Askenazi's interpretation of Joseph is its framing as a commentary on the meaning of Jewish exile, Galut. As Askenazi makes clear, in the Genesis narrative, Joseph represented his extended family, namely, all of Jacob's children and their households. And, at the same time, for Askenazi, Joseph should be viewed as a specific exemplar of the collective mission of the Jewish people and of the ideal vocation of each Jewish individual, including in Askenazi's time. In other words, Askenazi presents his postwar French readers with an ideological framework that gives meaning to their own reality as French citizens and members of the Jewish community, effectively a religious framework for diasporic Jewish existence. In this Josephic type of Judaism, French Jews should staunchly uphold their religious values and identity, without assimilating into majority French society. Moreover, Askenazi's ideal Jews are called to take an active part and even seek leadership positions in all areas of advancement of the French state. Finally, this "civilizing mission" of French Jews follows a broader universalist Jewish commitment to share the "moral goods" that Judaism has to offer.

To further appreciate Askenazi's Josephic move, it would be helpful to attend to Askenazi's location within the broader context of pro- and anti-diasporic positions in early twentieth century Jewish thought. In terms of his philosophical heritage, early Askenazi belonged to a strand of Jewish thought which strived to invest Jewish exile with a positive meaning, and correspondingly came to affirm Judaism as an eternal diasporic community. Better known figures in this strand were the German Jewish thinkers Hermann Cohen and Franz Rosenzweig, whose works were diligently studied by Askenazi's teacher, Gordin.

Especially in his posthumously published work, *Religion of Reason Out of the Sources of Judaism* (Cohen 1972), Cohen drew on precedents in Jewish medieval philosophy to provide an affirmative account of Jewish exile. Cohen interpreted historical Jewish suffering as related to an inherent diasporic function, consisting of a vicarious suffering for acts of injustice carried on by non-Jews and a related maintenance of the very idea of morality and subjectivity (cf. Poma 2005). As for Rosenzweig, in his key work, *The Star of Redemption* (Rosenzweig 2005), he advanced a theological–historical division of labour between Judaism and Christianity. In Rosenzweig’s scheme, Judaism lives “outside of history”, as an already redeemed diasporic religious community whose presence inspires the political worldly works of the not-yet redeemed Christian nation (for one discussion, see Myers 2003, pp. 68–105). Despite important differences between them, both Cohen’s and Rosenzweig’s positions affirmed exile as an ideal and indefinite status for Jews, and tacitly assumed that at the individual and community level, Jews will be respected citizens and members of their respective host nations.

Similarly, Cohen as well as Rosenzweig formulated their works with acute awareness of a Christian polemical context, that is, as a response to traditions of Christian replacement theology which saw Jewish exile as both proof of and punishment for alleged deicide (cf. Funkenstein 1990). However, neither Cohen nor Rosenzweig sufficiently grounded their pro-exilic positions in traditional Jewish sources. This lacuna was filled by Gordin, who in his teachings reinforced pro-diasporic philosophies like those of Cohen and Rosenzweig by appealing to Lurianic kabbalah and related Hasidic thought. In particular, Gordin drew on the Lurianic theory of the breaking of the vessels and its Hasidic expansion to justify the continuation of exile (Gordin 1950). According to one explanation for this Lurianic theory, the world is full of a near-infinite number of divine sparks that are, in a way, imprisoned by various material aspects of reality. Cosmic redemption, or restoration, called *Tikun*, will only come about when all divine sparks will be released and collected, by means of righteous deeds and study of the Torah (Scholem 1976). While originally only select mystics were the carriers of this metaphysical Lurianic mission, Hasidic thought expanded the range of persons to which this theory applied to include, at least in principle, the entire Jewish community (cf. Idel 2013). When Gordin imparted this theory to French-Jewish audiences, Askenazi among them, he drew especially on one exegetical application of this theory to the case of biblical Egypt. Following Lurianic sources, Gordin highlighted Egypt as the historical exemplar of an exile wherein the presence of the Jewish people affected the release of the divine sparks imprisoned within Egypt (Gordin 1950). Following Cohen more than Rosenzweig, Gordin drew exegetically on the biblical Egyptian precedence to affirm Jewish exile as characterized by a mystical struggle against evil, for which the suffering involved is bound to ultimately affect world redemption. Following Gordin, and through Gordin also Rosenzweig and Cohen, Askenazi’s diasporic approach was therefore reinforced by Lurianic sources. Indeed, while Askenazi was familiar with Lurianic literature and teachings well before he arrived in France, it seems that, at least during Askenazi’s early years in Paris, his philosophical and kabbalistic reading of Joseph and exile were primarily influenced by Gordin.

Askenazi’s Josephic Judaism in LJLS thus had its precedents in a modern tradition of an affirmation of exile. More than his predecessors, however, early Askenazi also had to face the challenge presented by those who not only joined the traditional negative view of Jewish exile but called for exile’s imminent and complete annulment. These were representatives of the ideology of the “negation of exile” which was promoted, under various cultural and political programs, by a wide array of Zionist thinkers (Schweid 1984; Don-Yehiya 1992; Ratzaby 1995). According to the most radical representatives of this view, exile has been a lingering liability for Judaism, and the main cause for the physical, political, and moral degradation of Jews as a national group. In this view, consequently, the solution to Judaism’s many illnesses, and, *mutatis mutandis*, to rampant anti-Semitism, would be to affect a mass Jewish migration to the land of Israel, cut all geographical ties with exile, and renew the Jewish nation politically, culturally, and spiritually on its ancestral

land. Corresponding to this approach was a claim that only the establishment of a national polity will finally enable the Jews to “return to History”, namely, to become an independent political actor on the so-called stage of world history (see discussion in Eisenstadt 2004). In addition to these theoretical arguments that Askenazi, following Gordin and others, had to confront, he also had to respond to a more direct postwar claim: that the Shoah confirmed the Zionist view. The horrors of the Shoah were seen by many as a last and tragic proof of the Zionist argument that, to put it mildly, the exilic condition is ultimately a detriment to Judaism.<sup>13</sup>

Seen in this pro- and anti-diasporic context, Askenazi’s Josephic move presents a novel and predominantly pro-diasporic response to the negation/affirmation conflict. First, following what was described as the traditional religious view of exile, at least in LJLS, Askenazi does not suggest that exile is an ideal Jewish condition. Nevertheless, he does affirm it as a necessary Jewish “trial” concerning Judaism’s universal contribution to humanity. However, while the Lurianic ideas are clearly in the background, Askenazi’s treatment of Joseph focuses on worldly actions and is completely lacking in metaphysical or mystical explanations. Like his treatments in LJLS of other biblical figures, as well as elsewhere in many later *Engendrements* lectures, Askenazi tells the story of Joseph as a “secular myth,” in the sense that the main actions of the protagonists are human actions applied to human, political, and worldly affairs. Consequently, Askenazi’s Joseph, as an exegetical archetype applied to a contemporary Jewish position, offers an alternative to (secular) Zionist claims regarding Jewish politics and history. Askenazi’s Josephic Judaism was never outside history, nor did exile cause its ethical or physical demise. Rather, this early exegetical piece by Askenazi presents a Judaism for which exile is a matter of intentional moral choice. For Askenazi, French Jews, following Joseph, are choosing to be a religious community whose members are proudly “in history” as “engaged” leaders of political projects in the country where they are citizens.<sup>14</sup>

## 6. Joseph in Later Askenazi

The discussion in paper has focused on a specific and early treatment of the figure of Joseph by Askenazi. Although this treatment appears in a text that was neither finished nor published, as my analysis suggested, I take it as representative of Askenazi’s broader approach in the early postwar years. Before the conclusion of this paper, therefore, I offer several general comments related to the shifting role of Joseph in Askenazi’s thought. My aim is to provide a preliminary view of these changes and indicate directions for further research on this topic.

First, an expanded treatment of Askenazi’s view on biblical Joseph should consider the rabbinic and mystical sources where Joseph is a messianic figure. Beginning in early second temple era rabbinic sources, and continuing in the Zohar as well as later mystical movements, the messiah son of Joseph forms a dyad with the messiah son of David (Scholem 1971; Berger 1985; Heinemann 1975; Elqayam 1997). In this dyadic scheme, the appearance of the Josephic messiah is supposed to precede that of the Davidic messiah in the temporal order of redemption. Moreover, in many sources, the Josephic messiah is portrayed in more secular terms as a warrior king who is even destined to die before the more spiritual Davidic messiah can appear. Later writings by Askenazi suggest that he viewed Joseph through this mystical messianic prism (for example, Askenazi 1954). In this context, when Askenazi reads biblical Joseph typologically into contemporary Jewish life in postwar Europe, it also suggests a specific temporality within which Askenazi located himself. If one exists in a Josephic time, then perhaps one lives in a potentially messianic era, albeit one that is characterized by exilic–diasporic Jewish existence as preparation for a later utopian Davidic messianic time.

In addition, Askenazi’s readings of Joseph should be studied in connection with his move, during the postwar decades, from a diasporic Jewish view to a Zionist informed perspective on Judaism. This shift may have been related to Askenazi’s view of the figure of Joseph in two ways. First, once Askenazi became sympathetic to Zionism, it seems that



the figure of Joseph, which he previously identified with communal diasporic existence, became identified with Zionism as a collective, secular, and messianic state-building project (cf. [Askenazi 2006](#)). Second, and relatedly, Askenazi's temporal theological view also shifted. By the 1960s, it seems, Askenazi suspected he was living at the beginning of a Davidic messianic time that would possibly replace the Josephic one (cf. [Rotenberg 2019](#)).

Moreover, Askenazi's early embrace of the figure of Joseph may be tied to an anti-Christian polemical element in his thought. Askenazi was aware of associations made between Jesus and Joseph in the Christian tradition, and his work on Joseph may also be seen as a move to reclaim this biblical figure from its perceived Christian appropriation (cf. [Askenazi 1999](#)). At the same time, curiously, during Askenazi's later years in Israel after he embraced Zionism, there are indirect indications that he was willing to (re)grant Christianity a "Josephic" role, provided that the Church would recognize itself as a certain diasporic extension of Judaism.<sup>15</sup> This interesting interchange between Askenazi's respective perceptions of Zionism and Christianity as reflected in his explications of Joseph merits further scholarly attention.<sup>16</sup>

My final comment concerns the methodological use of typology by Askenazi, both in the case of Joseph, and also when discussing other biblical figures. The general pattern, to which Askenazi's "typological thinking" fits, may be compared to the hermeneutical moves examined by Amos Funkenstein, ([Funkenstein 1993](#), pp. 88–120). In various works, Funkenstein offered a classificatory scheme of two types of historical reasoning prevalent in medieval Europe: typological and accomodational. Funkenstein primarily associated the typological type of reasoning with the Christian tradition of biblical interpretation. In a typological way of reasoning, events in the past form a framework to decipher the eschatological present. The second type of reasoning, according to Funkenstein, assumed that human history is driven by a principle of divine accommodation, namely, by careful divine guidance that adapts itself to the limits of human conditions. Progress in the past, therefore, could be seen as a manifestation of the divine guidance of human history, which, in turn, could be projected into the future. For Funkenstein, especially in his *Theology and Scientific Imagination* ([Funkenstein 1986](#)), it was the latter approach of divine accommodation which was gradually secularized into modern historical notions of progress, invisible hand, and the cunning of reason. In contrast, the typological view was seen by Funkenstein as belonging to the religious past, and absent in contemporary secularized European culture. In light of Funkenstein's works, I suggest, Askenazi's redeployment of typology marks a moment of reactivation of historical typological thinking in the 20th century, shared, albeit with notable differences, by French Catholic theologians like Henri De-Lubac and Jean Daniélou (for example, see [Daniélou 1960](#)). From this perspective, Askenazi may be seen as a Jewish participant in a broad counter secular move, which sought to reactivate older patterns of theological and mystical thinking to deal with a new and challenging human reality in a postwar world.

## 7. Conclusions: Migration and Vocation

In this paper, I analyzed an early exegetical treatment of the figure of Joseph authored by Askenazi, a North African-born Jewish thinker and French citizen who migrated to Paris shortly after the end of the Second World War. As my analysis has demonstrated, Askenazi's hermeneutics of Joseph belong within an extended Jewish conversation on the meaning of exile, a conversation to which the Shoah gave a new and pressing urgency. Taken solely within this primarily European context, Askenazi's treatment of Joseph should be read as a distinct addition to the longer history of Jewish reflection on the question of exile and its spiritual and political meanings.

At the same time, taking Askenazi's geographic itinerary into account, his explication of the figure of Joseph can also be seen as an expression of a new theoretical framework for Francophone Jews migrating to the metropole in the postwar years. This framework applied more particularly to Jewish migrants from the Maghreb, and most specifically to French-Jewish "repatriates" from Algeria. As noted in the beginning of this paper,

by the early 1960s, practically all of Askenazi's community, the Jewish community of Algeria, left Algeria, and the majority of them settled in France. For this North African Jewish community in the first stages of their reconstitution on the European side of the Mediterranean, Askenazi's ideas, admittedly not always in the form of LJLS but certainly in its spirit, could, and did, appeal. The positive, traditionally anchored and exegetically supported exilic–diasporic model presented by Askenazi offered a constructive framework in which these immigrants could give meaning to their modern exile. Rather than, or at least as complementary to, the negative story of exile from the beloved Algerian home due to the hardship of war and persecution, North African Jewish “repatriates” could, with Askenazi, imagine their move as a positive volitional act. Like Joseph, and like their biblical ancestors, Askenazi's listeners and readers could view their migrant experience as a larger, heroic struggle for the greater benefit of France.<sup>17</sup>

While Askenazi focused on Judaism, and his vision of the Jewish mission was entrenched in his broader theological commitments, there is much to learn from his discussion of Joseph in Egypt for thinking about migration. Askenazi's approach, I suggest, joins other claims made by economists, sociologists, and political scientists regarding the benefits that a society stands to gain from welcoming its newcomers. More than a theological attempt to convince policy makers in the receiving country, Askenazi's ideas, in the limited way discussed in this paper, offer a positive ethics of integration for migrants themselves. In contrast with a perception of migrants as merely on the receiving end of help and support, Askenazi's biblical hermeneutics recommends that migrants hold a more confident position, according to which their special abilities, skills, and very presence are valued benefits for their new society.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Jewish presence in Algeria, and in North Africa more broadly, preceded the arrival of Islam to North Africa and goes back, at least, to Roman times. During the 14th and 15th century, this already established population, then under the Ottoman empire, was joined by a wave of Jewish migrants expelled from Spain and Portugal. This expulsion, which followed the end of the Catholic wars of conquest of the Iberian Peninsula, brought to a tragic crescendo several centuries of expulsions of Jews from across all of Christian Europe (Chouraqui 1968, pp. 3–23 and 86–91).
- <sup>2</sup> There was another narrative of migration presented to Algerian Jews, that of “Aliya” ascent to Israel. Indeed, this narrative and action was promoted, in Algeria, by official and non-official representatives of the State of Israel. However, active political lobbying by Jewish community leaders in Paris, which coalesced with republican values and anti-Israel attitudes among French officials, allowed, from the perspective of the current argument, for the repatriation narrative to be the dominant one. cf. the discussion in (Shepard 2006).
- <sup>3</sup> On Luria see (Fine 2003).
- <sup>4</sup> Methodologically, Askenazi's project, which, while drawing on kabbalah and midrash, was nevertheless grounded directly in the biblical text, may be described as a parallel to Levinas's better known Talmudic lectures. In these lectures, Levinas brought the Talmudic texts to bear on contemporary philosophical questions. On the lectures, and Levinas's project in his Jewish writings, see the introduction by Annette Aronovitz (Aronowicz 2019).
- <sup>5</sup> For an extensive treatment of Askenazi's Engendrements see (Werdiger 2021).
- <sup>6</sup> Léon Askenazi, *Loi juive et loi scout*, (Askenazi unpublished manuscript), Léon Askenazi archive, File 22A, Jerusalem, Israel (Askenazi). For a full discussion of this text see (Werdiger 2021).
- <sup>7</sup> This expression is taken from Exodus 19:4. Askenazi was not the first to use this expression to broadly characterize the universal role of Judaism. In the French context, he was preceded by Elijah Ben Amozegh and his posthumously published work, *Israel and Humanity* (Benamozegh et al. 1995).

- 8 Askenazi, LJLS, 22.
- 9 Askenazi, Ibid, 23.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Askenazi, Ibid, 24–25. My translation. In order to conserve the language of the original source, I retained Askenazi's use of male pronouns.
- 13 Argubaly, whereas earlier diasporic thinkers like Cohen or Gordin could find positive elements in Jewish suffering, in the aftermath of the Shoah, such a position clearly would have bordered on blasphemy. Further treatment of this moral and theological issue is beyond the confines of this article.
- 14 It would be interesting to read Askenazi's early approach, as well as that of Gordin, in light of the works on exile by Raz-Krakotzkin. For example, see [Raz-Krakotzkin \(2007\)](#).
- 15 For a partial illustration of Askenazi's later views on the Church as Jewish diaspora, see [Vassal \(1993\)](#). Vassal's proposed Jewish view of Christianity is influenced by that of Askenazi.
- 16 The topic of Askenazi's views on Christianity demands further research and extensive treatment. For now, see [\(Ben-Johanan 2022, pp. 206–23\)](#).
- 17 In this paper, I focused on Askenazi's Jewish and North African background. I did not address the ways in which his thought took part in the specificities of intellectual discourse in France at the time.

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