
IS THE MOST FAMOUS “JEWISH OPERA” JEWISH? Jacques Fromenthal Halévy: *LA JUIVE*

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*Ma nishtana halaila ha'ze
mikol haleilot? sheb'khol
haleilot anu okhlin hametz
umatza. halaila ha'ze kulo matza?*
(Why is this night different from
all other nights? [For example]
on all other nights we [can] eat
hametz [such as leavened bread, cake, etc.
from any grain] or matza, but tonight
only matza?)
—The Passover Haggada

*Ho lahma anya di akholu avahatana b'artza
d'mitzrayim. kol dikhfin yeitei v'yekhul.*
(Behold! This is the “bread of affliction,”
which our fathers ate in their land of Egypt.
Let all who are hungry come and eat.)

*Av harahamim shokhen m'romim b'rahamav
ha'atzumim hu yifkod b'rahamim hahasidim
v'hay'sharim v'hat'mimim k'hilot hakodesh
shemasru nafsham al k'dushat hashem.*
(May the Father of mercies . . . remember
those loving, upright and blameless ones,
the holy congregations, who laid down their lives
for the sanctification of the Divine Name.)
—The liturgy

Of all operas in the so-called (or even extended) standard repertoire, the one most likely to come to mind immediately for most opera aficionados as a “Jewish opera”—possibly along with Arnold Schoenberg’s *Moses und Aron*—is Jacques Fromenthal Halévy’s *La Juive* (The Jewess), premiered at the Paris Opéra in 1835. So it may come as a disappointment to some that its qualification as a “Jewish opera” per se may rest on wobbly ground and is open to question.

Halévy, who was born in 1799, was given the French name Jacques at his *brit mila* (circumcision on the eighth day of his life according to the Covenant) and soon afterward given the middle name of Fromenthal, which was thought to have a left-leaning, anti-political-establishment ring that reflected his parents' liberal outlook. (Some have referred to it as having a "revolutionary" ring.) That sociopolitical leaning, embraced by Halévy, was not necessarily at odds with his own liberalized modern Jewish *modus operandi* and communal as well as self-perception as a French Jew.

In fact, unlike a number of other Jewish composers for the Paris Opéra at that time, not only did Halévy *not* downplay his Jewish heritage and persona, he openly maintained affiliations with Jewish circles and Jewish communal agencies.¹

The original idea for *La Juive*, however, was not his, but that of Eugene Scribe (1791–1861), a well-known dramatist who had collaborated with Giacomo Meyerbeer (also a Jew, originally from what became Germany) on his opera *Robert le Diable*. Scribe first imagined and created the story that became the libretto for *La Juive*, and the initial title, which he subsequently abandoned for *La Juive*, was *Rachel ou L'auto-da fé*—a misinformed reference to the Inquisition (the Congregation of the Holy Office) and its mass executions of Christian heretics. The Inquisition, however, did not apply to Jews who had never converted, although Jews on the Iberian Peninsula prior to the expulsions of 1492 and 1497 were subject to mass violence and torture by other agencies of the Church—together with the governments—in attempts to force conversion, and out of other motivations as well.

While writing his libretto, Scribe apparently had no one composer in mind. When it was basically completed, he turned first to Meyerbeer as the reigning giant among composers for the Paris Opéra. But Meyerbeer turned him down. From what we know of the social and sociopolitical dynamics and the religious attitudes in Paris at that time, any number of factors could have been at play in Meyerbeer's rejection of the proposal—apart from his absorption in other projects. It is not certain whether he was reluctant to emphasize so publicly his Jewishness—although that was hardly a secret—or whether he might have thought the libretto foolish and full of holes (which, on several levels, it was, especially before the many adjustments after Halévy began working with Scribe, and which, in many respects, it still is), or whether he preferred not to associate himself with illuminating historical Christian persecution for fear of offending certain elements of French society. In any case, only then did Scribe invite Halévy, with some reservations at first.

By the time of the premiere, the libretto, as well as various corresponding musical elements, had undergone a number of modifications and adjustments, with composer and librettist working as a team. Also, Halévy's brother, Leon, a well-recognized dramatist and essayist, played an important role in suggesting revisions of the libretto as the composing of the score proceeded, helping with details of prosody and verse length. He later wrote that "few opera libretti have been subjected to more transformations than that of *La Juive*."² Particularly significant was his refining (if not mostly writing or rewriting) the text of what became one of the opera's most famous arias, "*Rachel, quand du seigneur*," replacing the earlier planned choral finale for Act IV. The aria remains a frequent feature on recital programs as well. Leon also had a hand in switching or trading voice types among the roles. Later, Halévy freely acknowledged and discussed these things, crediting Leon for his indispensable help as part of what almost amounted to a trio of creators.

Initially, there was thought to setting the opera in Goa, where the Inquisition had been imported not too long before the time frame of the story. But both Halévy and his brother decided early on that Constance (Konstanz), Switzerland, would be preferable for a number of reasons.

In addition, the substantive contributions of Adolphe Nourrit, one of the most celebrated operatic tenors of the day in France who was the first to sing the role of Eleazar, must not be overlooked. He is credited with developing the role, which Halévy and/or Scribe had originally thought to assign to a bass.

Even after the premiere, various modifications continued to be made for immediately subsequent performances that same season, including pruning and even eliminating certain scenes and choruses.

On its surface, *La Juive* has generally been perceived as an indictment of religious bigotry, more specifically of historical, religiously based Jew hatred and its consequences. In this particular storyline, that lethal obsession manifests itself in both clerical and popular Jew hatred as it thrived for many centuries from the twisted (but ultimately anti-Christian) beliefs and tenets of the Church of Rome—attitudes that were once and for all condemned only in the twentieth century by Pope John XXIII, with his humanistic transformations and rejection of long-held doctrines.

But the opera is also about taboos of love between Christians and Jews; about Jewish refusal to submit to conversion even on pain of torture and death, which much later became a matter of resisting social and sociopolitical pressures; and, in some views, about the theoretical possibility in the opera's time frame of a relatively liberal-leaning attitude—even human feelings—of a Church of Rome clergyman whose compassion, such as it is, is eclipsed by entrenched indoctrination since childhood. Thinking of him in terms of “kindliness,” however, as one or more analysts of the opera have done, is quite a stretch. Conditional civility would be a bit more appropriate.

There are also possible extra-musical, extra-artistic, and extra-operatic considerations that have been proposed as the backdrop to *La Juive*'s creation and reception vis-à-vis the July Monarchy in France (1830–1848). Indeed, the short-lived July Revolution of 1830, though a disappointment to radicals, ushered in a heady era of social critique, yet the effect of the July Monarchy on prevailing attitudes in Paris can too easily be exaggerated. The franchise in the new “July constitutional monarchy” under Louis Phillipe I, for example, applied to fewer than 200,000 taxpayers of means, a mere one percent of the population of Paris. And material inequality prevailed while, outside the *haute bourgeoisie*, socialism began to attract radicals who anticipated a revolution that they hoped would bring about more equally balanced social conditions. Still, the July Monarchy did host a fairly new situation for French Jewry as citizens “of the Jewish faith”: a general anticlerical mindset; conflicts between bourgeois liberalism and more progressive sociopolitical leanings even apart from radicals; reform versus traditional Judaic practices and customs; and varying attitudes toward assimilation. But despite the “new order,” this was mixed with persisting anti-Jewishness or anti-Judaism. In various analyses these and other issues have been read into the opera's significance. Some of them are open to question, although not, in all cases, subject to outright dismissal.³

From musical and dramatic standpoints, much about *La Juive* simply conformed to contemporaneous Parisian demand for grandiose spectacle, pomp, and elaborate choruses—all of which the libretto gave Halévy opportunities to animate and explore. And as the musicologist Richard Taruskin observed, the “impassioned indictment of religious bigotry” was “not what packed them in . . . It was, rather, the staging by Duponchel and Cicéri that bowled audiences over with its conspicuous consumption and its cast of thousands.”⁴ One reviewer's enthusiasm led him to imagine that “the opera may become a power capable of throwing its armies into the balance of power in Europe.”⁵

Together with the nature of the vocal lines, the orchestration, and other signature features cited above, *La Juive* is characteristically, inherently, and stereotypically French—completely apart from its subject.

DRAMATIS PERSONAE (Principals)

ELEAZAR, a Jewish goldsmith and jeweler	TENOR
RACHEL, his (adopted) daughter	SOPRANO
CARDINAL BROGNI	BASS
RUGGERIO, Grand Provost of Constance	BARITONE
PRINCE LEOPOLD.....	TENOR
PRINCESS EUDOXIE, his wife.....	SOPRANO

Numerous other smaller roles throughout:
courtiers, clergy, sergeant at arms of the
emperor's soldiers/archers, (Albert),
the emperor's butler, herald, and another
officer, and others.

CHORUS — the populace, crowd(s) and mob SATB

PLACE: Constance (Konstanz), Switzerland⁶

TIME: 1414

THE ACTION

BACKGROUND

Eleazar and Rachel have been living in Constance as part of a presumed small Jewish community ever since Eleazar was banished from Rome by the Count de Brogni, the chief magistrate of the city at the time. But before that, during one of Brogni's absences from the city, Rome was attacked by the Neopolitans. Upon Brogni's return, he found not only his palace burned, but his wife dead and his infant daughter gone with no trace and presumed dead. Unknown to him, however, Eleazar had rescued the infant. His son(s) having been burned, supposedly in some connection with Inquisition or other Church authority, he decided to take the baby girl, whom he named Rachel, with him when he was banished to Constance rather than returning her to the hated enemy of his people. Brogni sought solace in the Church, joined the clergy as a priest, was eventually elevated to the rank of cardinal, and then became a powerful figure in the service of the Holy Roman Emperor. Rachel, who was brought up as a Jewess, grew to be a beautiful young woman who eventually attracted the attention of Prince Leopold. The prince, in order to cover his true identity—first in the (successful) hope of Rachel's returning his infatuation and then in order to be with her and be seen with her—disguised himself as a Jewish painter named Samuel. And he has gone to work for Eleazar in that disguise.

The curtain rises on the town square or central crossroads of Constance, which is filled with people in a festive mood. The church door is visible, as is Eleazar's home and workshop on the other side. The populace is celebrating a Christian Feast Day that has been declared to honor Prince Leopold on his military victory against the Hussites and to announce the opening of the historic, supposedly "ecumenical" Council of Constance.⁷ It is being convened ostensibly for the purpose of attempting to mend the factional rift in the Church, but it is also ready to participate in rooting out local heretics. The audience is thus treated from the outset to a typically French operatic grand spectacle. Overlapping strains of a "*Te Deum Laudibus*" being sung inside the church can be heard outside.

As a Jew, Eleazar is naturally not participating in the Christian celebration. And we can assume that he has never done so, having simply ignored these events or ceremonies without arousing public, let alone life-threatening outrage. Yet in this case the crowd becomes incensed at hearing from his shop the sounds of his working on a Christian Feast Day—in their view, desecrating it. (The crowd's sudden consternation about this is a bit implausible; despite its Jew hatred, there would not necessarily have been any expectation of a Jew refraining from work on a day of a Christian celebration, especially one that is not a sacred day on the Christian calendar but merely proclaimed locally.⁸ Scribe created that implausible reaction of the townsfolk to provide a reason for their Jew hatred.) Ruggerio arrives on the scene, incites the crowd to more intense fury, and orders soldiers to bring Eleazar and Rachel to him. With the screaming support of the populace, he demands the execution of "the Jews" for profaning a Christian occasion.

Cardinal Brogni comes into town unexpectedly and, recognizing Eleazar, overrules Ruggerio's demand for his arrest. His expression of hope that pent-up hatreds can be dissipated and neutralized is rejected by Eleazar when Brogni attempts to befriend him. Eleazar reminds him that it was he who banished him from Rome, for which he is

not about to forgive him. Still, in his cavatine “*Si la rigueur,*” Brogni prays for tolerance.

[Mus. Example]

(Eventually Brogni’s ingrained animus toward Jewish separateness, rejection of the “true faith,” and denial or nonacceptance of Jesus will come to the fore, even as he would prefer to save the lives of Eleazar and Rachel in Act V. He has, after all, been imbued with this attitude toward the Jewish people for as long as he can remember.)

Eleazar and Rachel return home, and the crowd disperses. Leopold, in his Jewish disguise, calls on Rachel—serenading her from beneath her window.

It happens that this evening will be the commencement of the eight-day (seven in the Land of Israel) Festival of Passover, which is celebrated in Jewish homes on the eve of the festival by the elaborate participatory ritual known as the Passover *seder* (lit., order, in this case the order of its components). The seder is one of the most important, most festive celebrations on the Hebrew calendar, as the Passover *Haggada* (lit., telling), along with various symbolic foods preceding and following the feast, relates the exodus of the ancient Israelites from Egypt and Egyptian bondage. Rachel invites “Samuel” to the seder that evening. Meanwhile, the crowd gathers again outside to watch Emperor Sigismund and his soldiers enter the city and welcome them as the victors in battle over the Hussites.⁹

Eleazar and Rachel come out to sit on the church steps to watch the imperial procession. Ruggerio uses this as a pretext for inciting the crowd against “the Jews” once again. Accusing them of insulting the church by their presence on its steps, he recalls for the crowd the New Testament account of Jesus chasing the moneylenders out of the Temple—a typical invocation of Jew hatred for centuries in Europe, viz., that Jews are by nature avaricious (although that New Testament account and its context are commonly misunderstood and are not a basis for characterizations of Jews). The crowd threatens to throw Eleazar and Rachel into the Bodensee (Lake Constance), upon whose northwestern shore the town borders, just across the lake from the German district or state (now) of Baden-Württemberg. Albert orders his battalion of soldiers to seize them, but this time Leopold intercedes directly to hold back the mob, and he orders Albert to have his soldiers stand back.

Rachel is utterly confused by Leopold’s power; he is still disguised as Samuel, but somehow the crowd recognizes him as Prince Leopold. As the Holy Roman Emperor and his cortege enter the city, the crowd’s attention is diverted, and the act comes to an end with its excited words of welcome.

ACT II

The interior of Eleazar and Rachel’s home, that same evening.

As the curtain rises, we are supposed to assume that the seder has been in progress and appears to be nearing the event in the order known as *matza*—the point at which all assembled at the table partake of the *matza* ritually for the first time by eating a prescribed-size piece according to the related commandment. This is the eighth of the ten events in the fixed order of the first part of the seder, to be followed by the festive meal and the four remaining components to be observed to conclusion. Samuel, in his Jewish disguise, is present at the table, along with some members of Eleazar’s family and other guests. But when Eleazar distributes the *matza*, Samuel cum Leopold declines to eat his piece and tries to discard or hide it inconspicuously. This does not escape Rachel’s notice.

Whatever their rationales (and we can come up with some politically or sociopolitically related guesses), neither Scribe nor Halévy provided the slightest reason or even suspected reason for “Samuel’s” refusing to take even one bite of his piece of *matza*. It is never so much as mentioned. And, oddly enough, it seems that this obviously deliberate omission has not been questioned or discussed even in detailed analyses or studies of the opera examined for this essay. Keeping in mind, however, that Samuel is the Christian Leopold, we can be nearly certain that his fear to the point of hidden horror is directly related to the infamous Blood Libel, whereby it was widely

circulated and believed for many centuries that Jews routinely murdered Christian children annually to use their blood as a required ingredient in the baking of *matza* for Passover. This calumny, apparently ignited in England in the thirteenth century, spread across Europe and came eventually to contaminate parts of the Ottoman Empire as well. So prevalent was it in some quarters as late as the 1890s that at the World's Parliament of Religions of the 1893 Columbian Exposition (World's Fair) in Chicago, the Archbishop of Zante—head of the Greek Orthodox Church—demanded that the attending clerical representatives of nearly every religion in the world swear an oath that they knew the Blood Libel to be untrue. Yet it persisted openly after that, and probably nowhere more famously for its time than in the Russian Empire, as exemplified by the Mendel Beilis trial in the first decade of the twentieth century. And it has never been absent altogether in the Russian sphere. (At least as of the 1990s and probably later, some fanatic even if marginal elements of the Russian Orthodox Church were convinced that the imperial family was murdered not by Bolshevik agents on Lenin's instructions—which was in fact the case—but by Jews who wanted the younger children's blood.) And in the first half of the twentieth century in America there were even some instances of suspicion when a Christian child disappeared, became lost, or the like.

So in 1414 a Leopold would not likely have escaped the assumption of the truth of the Blood Libel and thus the possibility that by eating *matza*, he might be consuming a murdered Christian child's blood. Even if we characterize him as relatively liberal and comparatively humanistic for his time, Leopold would have been exposed since childhood to that hideous vilification. Being in love with a Jew or Jewess, which happened occasionally, did not necessarily dissolve ingrained prejudices and myths about Jews or Judaism, and Leopold could at the very least have had misgivings about the *matza*—without its necessarily having been baked by Rachel or her father.

Another, albeit not mutually exclusive, explanation could have been Leopold's uninformed assumption that, apart from anything to do with the Blood Libel, eating *matza* was somehow a Judaic ritual religiously forbidden to Christians—in a way analogous to excommunicated Roman Catholics being forbidden to take Communion or even eating a communion wafer. But the Blood Libel connection on its own is far more likely to have been Leopold's concern.

Apart from everything else about the purported “seder scene” as a convoluted absurdity having nothing to do with an actual seder or with the Haggada (as if Halévy didn't know better, which he certainly did) is that the operative word “*matza*”—which does not translate to French or any other language as “unleavened bread”—never so much as appears in the libretto. It is called merely *pain sans levain*. What that is supposed to mean or signify may have been obvious to most Jews in the audience. But especially in 1835, reference to “unleavened bread” would have been meaningless for most if not all non-Jews in this context. And it would be misleading even in the twenty-first century to most non-Jews and, regrettably, a good number of Judaically uneducated, oblivious Jews. There are dozens of types of unleavened breads that are not *matza*.

Compounding the drivel as he distributes what is meant to be the *matza*, Eleazar offers an inapplicable explanation that comes out of nowhere other than Scribe's uninformed imagination (with Halévy's acquiescence): “*Partageons nous par ce pain ses mains consacré et qu'un levain impur n'a jamais altéré.*” (Let us share this bread consecrated by His [God's] hands [“dedicated” in some published translations] and at no time sullied by impure [“unclean” in some translations] leaven.)

Matza, however, is man-made and not “consecrated” by God.¹⁰ What is sacred or holy is the commandment to eat a prescribed portion of it at the seder, as well as the human care taken in making and baking Passover *matza* according to the established rules derived from rabbinic exegesis based on the commandment in the Torah. Moreover, “leaven” itself, viz., the risen and and/or fermented dough from any of the five grains listed in the Torah, is hardly impure or unclean, just forbidden from consumption by Jews during Passover. And Eleazar makes no allusion to the reason for *matza*, its symbolism and representation, its rationale, its Judaic biblical origin, its connection to the Exodus from Egypt, or why it must be “unleavened” by definition. All this renders the fragmentary scene utterly ridiculous—viz., inviting and deserving ridicule.

As if that were not sufficiently preposterous for what is designated as a seder, the distribution and eating of the *matza* is introduced and preceded by some newly invented poetry under the heading of “a prayer,” which is not part of any seder procedure. That could be acceptable as a heartfelt interpolation not necessarily forbidden, were it not for the fact that here it replaces altogether the two mandatory ritual pronouncements before partaking of the *matza*. These are the two *b’rakhot* that must precede the first bite: the first acknowledging God for “bringing forth bread from the earth,” and the second referring to God’s having commanded this eating of *matza*. (*B’rakha*, sing., is commonly mistranslated as “benediction” or, worse, “blessing,” but is an anaphoric Hebrew formula with no acceptable equivalent in English or any other non-Jewish language.)¹¹

Instead, ignoring completely the requirement for the *b’rakhot*, Eleazar leads the assembled in the new prayer that is not in the Haggada and has nothing to do with the ceremony and ritual of the *matza*, rambling on about Divine protection and hiding the Jews’ mysteries:

“O God and God of our fathers, come down amongst us! O God, hide our mysteries from the eyes of the wicked! You who enlighten us, come down amongst us! Hide our mysteries from the eyes of the wicked!

If treachery or perfidiousness dared to steal amongst us, let perjurers or blasphemers bring down your wrath, great God! [Then rising]

And all of you, children of Moses, pledge of the allegiance promised to our forefathers, share out this bread dedicated [consecrated] by my hands and unsullied by impure [“unclean”] leaven.”

Eleazar distributes the *matza* with no further words and with all at the table skipping the *b’rakhot*.

In calling for God to bring down His wrath specifically on those who deserve it, Eleazar’s inserted “prayer” does contain a possible allusion to a recitation that occurs much later in the established order—after the meal, as the seder is about to resume with the opening of the door for Elijah the Prophet. But the wording there is rather different, calling on God to pour out His wrath on the nations that repudiate Him and do not recognize Him, viz., which have thus had no compunctions about persecuting the Jewish people to the point of “devouring” them and destroying their habitations.¹² Otherwise, nothing in Scribe’s new prayer relates to a seder or to the Haggada. And the elimination of both the *b’rakhot* and the significance of the *matza* vis-à-vis the Exodus from Egypt defy understanding or justification—if, that is, the intention was to replicate a seder. Obviously, Scribe’s “prayer” was written to provide the composer with material for a vocal number, which is fair game in opera.

On the other hand, a text at this point based instead on the Passover story—the suffering of the Israelites under bondage, the role of Moses, the visitation of the plagues on the Egyptians, the sacrifice of the paschal lamb, and the supreme awe of the Exodus from Egypt—could have provided equally dramatic and emotional material for operatic treatment. In any case, the *b’rakhot* needn’t have been omitted, nor the reason for the *matza* left out. Without these, the claim to be a seder reenactment makes no sense.

As related in the Haggada, *matza* is one of three Passover items or symbols. The sage Rabban Gamliel used to say that whoever has not explained them has not fulfilled his obligation (the two others being the paschal lamb and the *maror*, or bitter herbs)—referring to the leader of a seder, but also by extension to all capable of reading the Haggada. Thus the Haggada provides what must be said before distributing the *matza* for eating:

This *matza* that we eat, why? Because the dough of our ancestors did not have time to become leavened bread before the King of Kings, the Holy One blessed be He, revealed Himself to them and redeemed them. And as the Torah states, “And they baked cakes of *matza* from the dough that they had taken with them from Egypt . . . because they were released [suddenly] from Egypt and could not delay there; nor had they prepared themselves any provisions for the way [the exodus].”

An audience that knows none of this—not even the basic aspects—will miss the point of the scene. Halévy could have included at least an encapsulation. There is no reason not to assume that he and his family held a seder annually, even if abridged. The seder was retained even by the most liberal, reform-minded French Jews who, like Halévy, did not want to shed every bit of religious life or Jewish participation. Moreover, had the composer of *La Juive* not been a Jew, he most likely would have consulted with a local rabbi about the seder.

Jewish opera patrons who have never had an opportunity to attend a production of *La Juive* have always tended to boast about the seder scene in it, taking a measure of pride in the inclusion of so important a Judaic ritual observance in a major opera. And many have assumed that the scene incorporates something of the related traditional melos, which Halévy certainly knew. Regrettable as it may be to disabuse them, however, simply distributing some “unleavened bread” that is not even identified as *matza* hardly makes the scene a seder. Taking everything into consideration concerning this opening segment of the second act, we must conclude that it could have been but is not actually a seder. Some of us will always wonder why Halévy let the scene stand as Scribe apparently wrote it, without taking advantage of the opportunity to inject a bit of Judaic authenticity.

Meanwhile, as the *matza* is being distributed and everyone except Samuel is beginning to eat it, there is a loud knock at the door—just as Rachel is about to confront Samuel about his refusal to partake. As voices call out to open the door in the name of the Emperor, everyone retreats to the back of the house—except Eleazar and Samuel, whom Eleazar has asked to stay. The libretto tells us that ritual objects are hastily removed and hidden, which makes little sense inasmuch as a seder at home is not violating any law or being conducted in secret. In fact it would have been expected of Jews in the town.

In any case, Leopold’s wife, Princess Eudoxie, has come to purchase—as a gift for her husband in celebration of his military victory—a rare jewel that she has heard Eleazar owns. In the dim light she does not recognize Leopold in his disguise, and he manages to turn away from her. When she asks who he is, Eleazar simply replies that he is a painter. The price of the jewel is agreed, and Eleazar promises to deliver it to Eudoxie at the palace the next day. (That the next day is the first day of Passover, therefore a holy day, is ignored or bypassed, just as is Eleazar’s conducting business in the middle of the seder. Eudoxie does not appear to be belligerent, and there is no reason to assume she would not have objected to being asked to return two days later for discussion about the jewel.)

Nothing in the opera refers to continuation of the interrupted seder. Still confused about Samuel’s refusal of the *matza*, Rachel tells him that she wants to speak with him. But they agree it would be more discreet to wait until later that evening. And Leopold, having overheard the negotiation with Eudoxie about the jewel, is tormented by feelings of guilt. He leaves, to return later for the rendezvous with Rachel.

Awaiting “Samuel’s” return, Rachel becomes anxious about what now appears to be some secret of his, which she expresses in her aria, “*Il va venir.*”

When he arrives and she confronts him with her concerns, Samuel confesses that he is a Christian—not revealing

his identity as Prince Leopold or the fact that he is married. (References are made to them as lovers, but whether they have had sexual relations is never clear.) He begs Rachel to run away with him, which is all that Eleazar hears when he comes upon them. He angrily accuses “Samuel” of betraying his hospitality, swearing that he would strike him dead on the spot were he not a fellow Jew. Samuel tells him to go ahead and strike him, but Rachel intervenes with a plea so heartrending that her father is moved not only to forgive them but to urge Samuel to marry her.

Of course, Leopold cum Samuel says that he cannot do so, without explaining why—viz., his married state—and he runs out of the house as Eleazar curses him. Determined to learn Samuel’s other apparent secret—viz., why he cannot marry her now that her father has consented—Rachel picks up a cloak and follows him.

ACT III

(NB. Scenes 1-4 were omitted after the premiere.)

In the palace, the next day.

Singing ecstatically over her husband’s return, Eudoxie is interrupted, to be told that a seemingly distressed young woman seeks an audience, which is granted. Rachel enters, certain that Samuel is in the palace, as she had followed him there the night before. Having spent the night just outside the gates, she knows he has not left. She asks a favor of Eudoxie: May she spend one day as a royal servant? Declining to reveal her reason for so strange a request, she promises to reveal it later. Although she has a foreboding, Eudoxie agrees and leaves the room.

Prince Leopold enters the palace apartment appearing troubled, but Eudoxie tries to cheer him. This only adds to his feelings of guilt, and he is about to confess everything when they hear the sound of trumpets outside, signaling the beginning of the ceremony honoring him.

As promised, Eleazar comes in with the jewel. As Eudoxie places the chain around Leopold’s neck, the truth of his marital status becomes clear to Rachel, and she steps forward to denounce him.

Outside the palace, Eleazar asks if Leopold’s rank can protect him. Brogni confers with other clergymen and determines that it cannot. In a sextet sung by Rachel, Eleazar, Eudoxie, Leopold, Ruggerio, and Brogni, backed up by the chorus, Brogni pronounces the anathema that concludes the act—ordering imprisonment of Leopold, Eleazar, and Rachel. That Leopold is now in serious trouble with the authorities, even as a prince, suggests adultery—or at least it is assumed—not merely his courting of Rachel.

ACT IV

Eudoxie has received permission to speak with Rachel in prison. She tells Rachel that she can save Leopold’s life by confessing that she was wholly at fault (as a seductress?), and Rachel agrees.

Cardinal Brogni enters, and Eudoxie leaves. Rachel informs him that she is ready to confess her role before a tribunal.

In a room before the council chambers, after all three have been given death sentences, Rachel reminds the cardinal that she has a confession to make before the tribunal, and she is led away. Brogni would try to save her and her father if only Eleazar agreed to embrace Christianity, and he pleads with Eleazar to do so in a duo, “*Ta fille en ce moment.*”

Even the suggestion of conversion is repugnant to Eleazar, who is ready to die instead. But first he will have revenge on at least one Christian. Yet he had hoped that Christian Leopold’s rank might protect him. In terms of vengefulness in particular, as well as other aspects of Eleazar’s personality as a stereotype made implacable by the history of Jewish persecution and Jew hatred, analogies have been drawn to Shylock in Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice*. But their situations are quite different, and the portrayal of Shylock is far more complex.¹³ For one thing,

Shylock is not the father of any children who have been burned or otherwise murdered by church authorities. He represents—and responds to—a more generic history of persecution and Jew hatred, which has extended into his own life and time. (It should also be kept in mind that Shakespeare—out of political motivations and/or necessity and for acceptance—was consistently a defender and supporter of Elizabeth I’s rightful occupation of the throne as an anti-papist Tudor, which meant supporting the exclusive legitimacy of the Church of England, of which Elizabeth was head. “Heretics” and other perceived opponents or enemies were still burned or otherwise murdered by her authority.)

Other literary sources that have been cited as possible models for Eleazar and Rachel—none of which is really applicable upon thorough comparison—are Sir Walter Scott’s *Ivanhoe* (1819); Christopher Marlowe’s *The Jew of Malta* (1590); and Gotthold Ephraim Lessing’s (1729–81) *Nathan the Wise*, for pairing a daughter with a wifeless Jew.

Eleazar, before the ultimate irreversible vengeance he seeks, reminds Brogni of the fire in Rome that destroyed his home and killed his wife, and tells him that his infant daughter did not in fact die as assumed—that she was rescued by “a Jew” who has taken care of her all these years, whose identity and whereabouts only he (Eleazar) knows. But that secret will die with him. Brogni implores him to reveal his daughter’s whereabouts, to no avail.

Yet Brogni will eventually go along with the executions, and will do nothing to try to halt and prevent them, unless Eleazar and Rachel convert in time. It is a mistake, as some analysts of the opera have done, to view Brogni as representing any degree of liberal clerical kindness just because he has asked Eleazar’s forgiveness for his banishment.

Refusing to reveal to Brogni his rescued daughter’s identity or whereabouts, Eleazar sings a tribute to the “God of Jacob [Israel],” while Brogni, before leaving the scene, sings of the “Christian God”—who is of course the same one and only God in Christian theology even though Brogni seems not to understand this.

Alone now, Eleazar is in turmoil. He cannot let Rachel be put to death just for the sake of his revenge. Almost about to accept conversion for her sake, he sings the famous aria, “*Rachel quand du Seigneur.*”

But when he hears the crowd again calling for the “death of the Jews,” he hardens and decides to let Rachel die as a martyr “reclaimed by Israel.”

ACT V

A public square in Konstanz, which has been set up to accommodate a seated crowd of exuberant townsfolk who are eager to witness with delight the barbaric execution of Rachel and Eleazar. At the edge of the square is a scaffold, with steps leading to its top, beneath which is a huge cauldron or vat of boiling oil (or other liquid), presumably heated and kept boiling by a burning wood fire beneath it.¹⁴ The seats are filled or becoming filled with the local spectators as a procession of penitents leads Rachel and Eleazar to the scaffold.

The crowd exults chorally at the imminent death of “the Jews,” “*Quel plaisir.*”

Ruggerio confirms Eleazar’s and Rachel’s death sentences, announcing that Leopold has only been banished. Eleazar proclaims that this is typical “Christian justice,” and Rachel reveals that it was her altered false testimony about who was “at fault” that saved Leopold’s unworthy life. She and Eleazar are led to the scaffold.

Brogni and others begin to chant prayers for those about to die. Rachel suddenly becomes frightened, and Eleazar is moved to pity. He asks her if she would convert to save her life. But she composes herself and confirms her own wish rather to die. Brogni begs Eleazar one last time to divulge the secret of his daughter's whereabouts. And just as Rachel is thrown from the top of the scaffold to her excruciating death in the boiling cauldron, Eleazar points to her and cries out: "LA VOILA!" (There she is!) Brogni buries his face in his hands and falls to his knees as Eleazar ascends the scaffold triumphantly to his own death.

In that final, horrifying moment, not only are the basic elements of the storyline altered retroactively—and of course significantly—in a flash, but the opera's title no longer applies—for Rachel, as Brogni's (biological) daughter, is not a Jewess after all. **OR IS SHE?**

Although it seems strange that it did not occur to any critics or analysts of *La Juive*, any Jew such as Eleazar who adopted de facto a baby and reared her from infancy as his own daughter—especially then, but now as well amongst observant Jews—would most certainly have had her converted officially as a baby, according to established Judaic procedures.¹⁵ (These provide for the child's opportunity to renounce the conversion at age twelve for a girl or thirteen for a boy. Otherwise, he or she is a bona fide Jew or Jewess as much as anyone born to a Jewish mother. This would probably have been way beyond Scribe's awareness or knowledge of Judaism, and quite possibly unknown to Halévy.)

The opera bypasses not only this matter but also any hint of Eleazar's not being Rachel's biological father (probably a widower) nor of her biological mother not being a Jewess—unless a few in an audience might begin to suspect something when Eleazar first tells Brogni that an unnamed Jew saved his daughter and that he (Eleazar) alone knows where she is. In the event, Rachel indeed dies a martyred Jewess.

Discrepancies among various drafts, draft versions, manuscripts, and even published opera scores and librettos, especially those of the nineteenth century, are a common and frustrating phenomenon. Such discrepancies can reflect revisions made during rehearsals, between productions, and with or without the composer's blessing and/or involvement. As the musicologist Diana Hallman has pointed out, this is particularly (though not exclusively) true in the case of *La Juive*.¹⁶ Consequently, arriving at a performance edition that we can assume is as close as possible to that of the composer (viz., the final, definitive, autographed score) can be nearly impossible. The task requires much research and comparison among various extant drafts as well as consultation of correspondence, notes, and other relevant documents. Even then, a degree of schooled judgment is necessary—leaving aside the more complicated procedures involved in creating a critical edition.¹⁷ And discrepancies are not necessarily explained away by "competing" versions or drafts.

To what extent or degree should *La Juive* even be considered a "Jewish opera" or an opera of Jewish experience according to our criteria outlined in the introduction? There is, after all, nothing in it of actual Jewish life that is faithfully, typically, or correctly depicted; and the one opportunity to demonstrate a bit of Judaic practice—the supposed seder scene—is, unnecessarily and for reasons unknown, bungled beyond recognition. It is as if Eleazar had no idea how to conduct a seder or what its components are, which, of course, any adult Jew at the time would have known. It also suggests that Halévy didn't know either, which cannot have been the case.

Eleazar's home and workshop could never have sat in a choice, conspicuous location at the edge of a major public square. It would have been located in a confined ghetto area—the more so because it was not only his place of business but his home.

Whatever the nature of his personality or his private leanings, Eleazar would never have failed to observe the first and last two days of Passover by not attending synagogue services and not refraining from his work on those days. We must keep in mind that in the early fifteenth century in Europe, for all intents and purposes, there were not yet “secularized” or anti-observant Jews, nor any movement geared to Judaic reforms. Eleazar might have been intended as a negative stereotype of medieval European Jewry, but only in some vague respects or assumptions that would have to be read into his character. A despised but apparently successful jeweler whose work nonetheless benefits and is in demand by non-Jewish customers, he is intensely embittered—not without legitimate cause, which Scribe and Halévy made a point of emphasizing with the choral calls for “Death to the Jews.” No doubt without realizing the offensiveness of repeating the historically anti-Jewish connotations of Eleazar as the long-standing malicious stereotype, some modern critics or analysts have pointed to “typical” avariciousness and greed in Eleazar’s negotiation with Eudoxie over the price of the jewel. But how so? How was lawfully earning a living avaricious?

Do we suppose that non-Jewish, even devout Christian merchants or craftsmen expected no payment for their work or merchandise? Eudoxie came to *purchase* the jewel, clearly without realizing that it was Passover eve in the middle of a supposed seder. Bargaining for prices was common if not standard practice in that time frame pretty much everywhere, and well into the modern era. But there was nothing belligerent or unfriendly about Eudoxie’s visit.

Readiness to interrupt the seder for the transaction with Eudoxie could be seen as a sign of material gain taking precedence over religious values and convictions on Eleazar’s part, except that this seems not to have been an issue. No one else at the seder table was disturbed by it, and no one objected. Moreover, clearly neither Eleazar nor anyone else in his home had any interest in continuing the seder after Eudoxie left, which in itself is entirely implausible *if* in fact it was intended to represent a seder. The main point Halévy (and Scribe) wanted to make had already been made, viz., “Samuel’s” declining to eat his portion of *matza*, thus setting the stage for the coming revelation of his Christian identity as Leopold. This was undoubtedly Scribe and Halévy’s reason for the convoluted seder excerpt in the first place. Halévy was more concerned about the scene’s dramatic impact than with its religious significance or the adherence of its participants.

La Juive is fundamentally about the historical persecution of Jews and Jew hatred, fostered in this case by the Church of Rome for centuries together with or sanctioned by relevant or related political authorities and institutions. By extension, it is an indictment of religiously based or religiously encouraged intolerance and the historically perceived need to force religious beliefs on others. And for 1830s Paris audiences, it was possibly also a message about France retaining its post-Revolution and post-Napoleonic secularism and keeping its distance from the Church or any institutionalized religion—all far more so than about Jewishness or Judaism.

Only if one considers persecution, torture, and murderous Jew hatred in their own rights intrinsic to Jewishness, can *La Juive* be considered a “Jewish opera.” But many of us are loath to define Jewish experience primarily by the deeds of the Jews’ tormentors, contributing to what the erudite Jewish historian Salo Baron criticized as the “lachrymose conception” of Jewish history. In that sense *La Juive* might better be understood as an opera of *anti-Jewishness*—in this case about the long history of politically, religiously, socially, and morally sanctioned Church-born atrocities. Which is not to say that there have not also been manifold persecutions and massacres of Jews, as Jews, throughout history that have had nothing to do with religious doctrines or religious intolerance—the Holocaust, for example, or an infamous *postwar* pogrom in Poland, or slaughters of Israeli children unrelated to any Islamic motivation. And with the risk of repetition here, it must be reemphasized that post-1960s audiences should keep in mind that it was Pope John XXIII, in his convened Second Vatican Council (1962–65, *Nostre Aetate*), who condemned once and for all any and all former Church doctrines or teachings that could be understood to be anti-Jewish—including but not limited to the absurd notion that “the Jews” were (or are) in any way responsible for the death of Jesus. Prior to that, especially among uneducated lower- or working-class Roman Catholic elements, it was not uncommon to hear references to Jews as “Christ killers.”

Sadly and hard as it is to fathom, however, that ignorant, mendacious assertion continued to spill over to the beliefs of some otherwise well-educated persons—even those who considered themselves unbigoted humanitarians. As recently as the late 1970s, for example, President Jimmy Carter—during his presidency—taught Baptist Sunday school classes in Georgia, in which he attributed the death of Jesus to “the Jews.” On *at least two occasions* these remarks were noted and later reported by an Associated Press reporter: in one class Carter explained to the Sunday school youngsters that Jesus had “directly challenged in a fatal way the existing church [sic], and there was no possible way to avoid the challenge, so they decided to kill Jesus”; and in another class saying that Jesus’s death was brought about “as quickly as could be arranged by the Jewish leaders, who were very powerful.”

In other contexts Carter could in no way be considered an antisemite—in fact, far from it. But religious indoctrination from childhood *can* be impossible to erase permanently, and Pope John XXIII’s dictum might well not have resonated among Southern Baptists, who were famously antagonistic to anything to do with Roman Catholicism or the Pope.

Depicting Eleazar as a “typical Jew”—even though intended as common representation as far back as the fifteenth century—might not have done any service to nineteenth-century French Jewry (or to Jews in general ever since). For in 1835 in Paris that image ran and runs counter to the modern Jews’ desired acceptance as a socially integrated part of the dominant society while still remaining Jews. And this stereotypical portrayal of Eleazar could easily feed into antisemitism, although it has often astutely been observed that an antisemite needs no provocation for his engrained attitude or behavior. “These tensions,” wrote the critic of the opera Olivier Bara in her 2004 study, “reveal an unstable position where ‘otherness’ is discovered and asserts itself within a French citizenship thought in terms of openness and integration, without mutilation.”¹⁸ She goes further to suggest that because *La Juive* was among the most expensive productions of the Paris Opéra, it equated grand opera with money intertwined with Judaism—which was the perception, for example, of the French composer Vincent d’Indy, who was known for harboring anti-Jewish sentiments. In Bara’s interpretation, the opera gave the impression of falsely combining Jewish persecution, Judaism, and Jewishness with lavish expenditure, which only risked confirmation of the stereotype of money-driven Jews by so costly and ostentatious a grand opera.

Moreover, Bara points out Isabelle Moindrot’s observation that the opera was intended and staged to denounce a situation of Jewish persecution and renewed antisemitism by “feeding it sumptuousness” and providing Halévy with “rhyming, well-timed slogans.” Which is to suggest that though Scribe and Halévy’s plot, storyline, and portrayals were well-intended, their intentions might have gone awry. If so, we might ask if the direction of their work was unintentionally colored by poor judgement.¹⁹

La Juive is hardly unique among major operas in the canon in which the libretto—unless deliberately a fairy tale, fictitious parable, acknowledged mythology, or purely symbolic representation—is severely wanting, even filled with foolishness and situations that make little sense. Indeed, an old adage concerning opera holds that as a general rule, it is best to invoke a “willing suspension of disbelief.” Even so, that policy could prove insufficient. For those who might be anticipating a specifically Jewish theatrical-operatic experience will—if they know anything much of Jewish history or Judaism—be utterly confused, not knowing what to make of *La Juive*. The opera, as an incongruous, implausible set of circumstances, exceeds the boundaries not merely of historical accuracy or plausibility but of artistic license.

La Juive has all the trappings of mid-nineteenth-century French grand opera and the conventions demanded by Paris audiences of the day: glorious vocal lines and contours, elaborate choruses, extravagances, stylistic breadth, vocal intricacy for the leads, courageous instrumentation for lush orchestrations, opulence, majestic splendor, variety of ensembles, and huge crowd scenes. But fifteenth-century mobs shouting “Death to the Jews!” or a pair of Jews being boiled alive at the order of an ecumenical council and a local cleric, neither of which had any such authority, do not in and of themselves make for a substantively “Jewish opera,” no matter how much disbelief is willingly suspended. In this sense *La Juive* is probably far better understood as a manifestly French opera, no less so, for example, than we relate to Meyerbeer’s *L’Africaine* as a French, not African, opera.

What stands out about *La Juive* for many of us is its artistic worthiness, which can easily engage us—the sheer beauty of its arias and ensembles, its melodic invention, its invitation for spectacular stagings, and its inherent drama despite the weakness of its libretto and Halévy’s acquiescence.

An example among the various misinformed interpretations or “deconstructions” that have been read into the opera erroneously but are devoid of any foundation whatsoever—in informal parlance, without even the weakest leg on which to stand—is Diana Hallman’s presumption that “in Rachel might be seen the new, reformed Jew, an *Israelite*, who accepts and adopts semi-Christian, occidental ways, without giving up the faith in which she was raised [*sic*: ‘reared’].” (Hallman, *op. cit.*)

The absurdity of that kind of twaddle bespeaks the unfortunate stigmata of academic theses or dissertations about which the advisers, to put it diplomatically, simply know no better.

On the one hand, of course it is true that nineteenth-century French Jews, in particular those of eastern European immigrant generations (but also from as yet unmodernized German-Jewish communities), did enthusiastically adopt “occidental” ways in terms of social mores and manners; socioeconomic and even political leanings or stances; appearances, including dress and fashion; and other features of acculturation—completely unrelated to and apart from anything remotely to do with religion, nor in conflict with Judaic practices either inside or outside the synagogue.

On the other hand, what in the name of the Almighty does “semi-Christian ways” even mean?—a rhetorical question as the meaninglessness of the phrase should be obvious. To in any way connect that meaningless phrase with the liberalization—“reform”—of traditional Judaism would offend mightily and understandably any Jews affiliated with nonorthodox branches of Judaic practices then and now, whether in Europe, England, America, or elsewhere. To attribute to modern-era reforms of Jewish practices or worship services a “semi-Christian” dimension crosses all lines of acceptable viewpoints and respect. It should not be necessary to point out that Christianity of any denomination is inseparable from belief in Jesus of Nazareth as the “Son of God” and the Messiah, on one level or another. Does “semi-Christian” mean Jewish adoption of half or some other part of that belief? And if so, which half or part? Or *if* “semi-Christian” was meant to refer to an atmosphere of decorum in Reform synagogue services whether in 1830s Paris or in general—by comparison with outsiders’ *perceived* nature of traditional synagogue worship—any such notion is misguided and misinformed.

In some ways the decorous nature of Reform services was the result of occidental influences (although that began prior to the 1830s in Germany), but had not the slightest thing to do with Christianity or Christian worship services. In any case, just what is suggested in what we know of 1830s Paris Jewry that could possibly be represented by Rachel?

Moreover, in the time frame of the opera, there was no such thing as reform of traditional Judaic practice, nor any departure from it. And nothing in the opera suggests otherwise. Eleazar’s made-up recitation at the supposed seder was Scribe’s invention, almost certainly out of ignorance, and represents no reform of an actual seder. Rachel is portrayed as a fully committed Jewess—so committed that she chooses death over conversion. In no way does she exhibit the slightest religious “ambiguity” as is read into the libretto in this “interpretation.” Falling in love with a non-Jew who she thinks is a Jew is hardly “religious ambivalence.” In fact Leopold makes no such demand of her conversion in his momentary proposition to run away with her. And how in the wildest imagination is Rachel’s “religious identity” colored by her relationship to the dominant Christian society? She has no relationship to Christian society in Konstanz or anywhere else. (There is nothing about her in the opera that suggests her representing in 1835 any particular position in Parisian Christian society—a possibility, of course, but one not connected to her portrayal as Rachel.) Even if Brogni had had her baptized as an infant in Rome (which is never

mentioned one way or the other), Rachel could have had no way of knowing that. And anyway, there is no such thing as “Christian birth” as an inherited characteristic.

Equally baseless is the offensive “take” (though surely neither intended nor realized as such) that Eleazar’s hatred and desire for revenge “undermine his essential morality” such that he himself has “exacerbated his own position within Christian society.” Just what position would that be? He can have no position in fifteenth-century Christian society other than being an object of scorn and hatred because—and only because—he is a Jew. The idea of his “exacerbating” his position reverberates with one of the oldest, most absurd, timeworn, anti-Jewish tropes, viz., that Jews somehow bear responsibility for their persecution—the infamous excuse that Jews have “brought upon themselves” resentment, persecution, and worse. In other words, apportioning even partial blame upon the victim. Sadly, one can hear that same outrageous reaction expressed today.

Although wanting revenge against “at least one Christian” is of course abhorrent, it is also implausible in Eleazar’s case when put that way and understood at face value to mean *any* random individual of the Christian faith. It is not, however, a matter of two-way religious intolerance. For centuries (and for centuries afterward) Christians had been intolerant of Jews, whereas Jews wished only to be left alone to be Jews and live as Jews without restrictions. And it is telling that Scribe and Halévy made a point of having the crowd sing “Death to the Jews!” *before* any vengefulness of Eleazar is revealed or articulated, even before his refusal to forgive Brogni.

If Scribe had originally planned Rachel’s conversion to follow her discovery of her “true identity” as Brogni’s biological daughter, that is irrelevant. Scribe obviously changed his mind, so that Rachel apparently has no idea that her biological father is anyone other than Eleazar—even at Eleazar’s shout of “VOILA!” Had Scribe followed his purported original plan, *La Juive* would be an entirely different opera.

On the other hand, there is merit in Hallman’s exploration of the opera as a reflection of the “anti-clerical thrust” in 1835 France and as a critique or reminder of historical abuses of church and state—all as part of the influential liberal ideology of the July Monarchy. And there is merit in her acknowledgment of simultaneous, contradictory antisemitic attitudes in French society. Indeed, as she astutely recognizes, Scribe and Halévy wrote their opera in that dual context.

* * * * *

In her study of modern Yiddish theater, Alyssa Quint proposes that *La Juive* depicts “religious fealty to be divisive, antihumanistic, and a weapon of the most spiteful and stubborn characters, Brogni and Eleazar.”²⁰ But one could take issue with that interpretation, in terms of the opera, especially inasmuch as Halévy, from what we know about him, would not have suggested that “fealty” to any one faith need necessarily be divisive—so long as the followers of one remain tolerant and respectful of the others. In other words, he was not one of those who then or now proclaim that they “hate all religions”—which should or could be respected as well. If Eleazar is spiteful, which he is, albeit for a given reason, his stubbornness is mainly his refusal to convert to Christianity. Even then, he relents for a moment to ask Rachel if she would convert to save her life. Neither stubbornness nor spitefulness describes Brogni *personally*, however. He would prefer to save Eleazar and Rachel from death, but he cannot bring himself to violate the indoctrination he has received since childhood from the Church (and its related society), which forces him to implore them to convert to save their lives after having been falsely (and implausibly) condemned by the council for heresy and/or anti-Christian behavior. The stubbornness and spitefulness belong to the Church in that time frame, and by extension to Church-related society.

Nonetheless, Quint’s point has merit in the sense that religion or adherence to a particular religion *can* have and, as of this writing does have, not only divisive but, in the case of one particular faith, savage consequences as a deathly, barbaric weapon against nonbelievers and/or an excuse for calculated attempts to destroy and eliminate a people and its state.

Extraordinarily well received, *La Juive* quickly became a staple in the repertoire of the Paris Opéra—with more than five hundred performances there by the First World War and many others elsewhere in Europe and America. One remarkable American production in the early 1920s, a few years after the war, was mounted in Chicago with the international star Rosa Raisa [Raitza Burchstein, a Jewess in her own right] singing Rachel. The most famous cantor in the world at the time, Yossele Rosenblatt, was invited to sing Eleazar after the general manager of the Chicago Civic Opera Company heard him sing at the Auditorium Theater—then the city’s opera house—in one of his many programs throughout the country to benefit victims and veterans of the war as well as to raise funds to reduce war debts, a program that typically included not only virtuoso cantorial as well as Yiddish selections but also a Schubert song and a Verdi aria. However, Rosenblatt declined—most likely because his synagogue in New York objected, even though the general manager assured its board in a now-famous letter that there would be no performances or rehearsals on the Sabbath and that Rosenblatt, as a scrupulously observant orthodox cantor, would not have to have any physical contact onstage with a woman, i.e., Rachel.

Ironically (or perhaps to have been expected), notwithstanding the enthusiastic reception of the premiere in Paris and the ubiquitous liberal attitudes, *La Juive* also provided an opportunity for a few dyed-in-the-wool Jew haters to read vitriolic absurdities into it. The peculiarly French brand of anti-Judaism and anti-Jewishness percolated beneath the surface in the 1830s; assumed to be dormant and espoused by only a few, it came to the fore with full force with the Dreyfus Affair (1894–1906)—and it appertained in France increasingly throughout the Second World War. Thus a reviewer of the premiere for *Gazette de France* had the uncamouflaged temerity to describe Rachel as a licentious woman without morals, whose depravity defiled marital bonds and degraded a royal personage—sheer, unbridled, hateful animus, as anyone who had seen and heard the performance should have recognized instantly. Rachel had not the slightest idea nor reason to suspect that “her Samuel” was a married man or that he was disguised royalty. So here was another example of blaming the Jewish victim for persecution and unprovoked belligerence.

There were other anti-Jewish actions, incidents, and expressed animus within the July Monarchy at the time of *La Juive*’s premiere. These demonstrated a divergence of attitudes vis-à-vis the acceptance of Judaism within Roman Catholic France. The law of the *culte Israélite* in 1831 had expanded the policy of religious freedom to stipulate Judaism as a state religion, so that government funds were allocated to rabbis as French clergy. This was welcomed by the Jewish community as a measure to protect Judaism and counter prejudice.

Yet only a year later there was the feverish uproar over an accusation against Simon Deutz, a Jew, for his alleged involvement in a conspiracy against Louis Philippe. He was even attacked by many liberals as a traitor, while many others supported him as a French patriot who had helped prevent civil war over the legitimacy (or not) of the monarch.²¹

Victor Hugo, who accused Deutz of “selling his soul,” revived the age-old image of the legendary Jew cursed by God for preventing Christ from having a resting place on the path to Calvary. In fact, as if Hugo were unaware or if it didn’t matter to him, Deutz had converted to Christianity a few years earlier. So Deutz was denounced by the Jewish community as well.²²

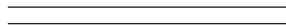
Then there was the notorious Damascus Affair in 1840, when French officials there invoked the Blood Libel in accusing Jews of having murdered a Capuchin monk and his (Muslim) servant to use their blood for *matza*. The charge was encouraged by the French consul, Ratti-Menon. The outrage ignited international protest, especially from England and the United States—coming from as high up as President Martin Van Buren, who intervened on his own, apart from American Jewish communal protest. Still, a number of French newspapers assumed the guilt of the accused Jews in Damascus.²³

All this should be kept in mind as part of the context in which *La Juive* nonetheless thrived in what, by all accounts,

was still a comparatively liberal society.

Alterations in productions and purported productions of *La Juive* have ranged over the years from subtle, practical, and legitimately subjective stagings on the part of directors to radical and even bizarre butchery. One of the most ludicrous, twisted so-called productions—nearly unrecognizable—was mounted at the Drury Lane Theater in London shortly after the Paris premiere. Billed as a two-act (some sources claim three) “melodramatic spectacle” by one J. R. Planché, it had no music except for two choruses, and it promised and delivered a “happy ending” in which Rachel is saved from death. Halévy was powerless to prevent that travesty under the copyright provisions in England then, a situation only partly rectified by the English courts more than fifteen years later. There were also subsequent productions in London early on, in French: one at Covent Garden by the Royal Italian Opera and another, again at Drury Lane, by the Brussels Opera Company. Titled *Zhidovka* in a Russian translation, a production in Odessa enjoyed a considerable run, as did a Yiddish version there that was advertised in 1881 in the *Odessa Herald*. And in 1888 a libretto was published in Warsaw as *Yehudis: A historishe drama in fir akten un finf bilder*. Benedict Ben-Tsiyon, an opportunistic Christian propagandist as a convert in Europe and a proselyte, devised a “version” of the opera that was staged in New York in 1881 by David Kessler, the illustrious Yiddish theatre personality.²⁴

For yet other productions in Russia and the Ukraine in the 1920s, the Jewishness of the opera was deemphasized under the spoiler title *The Cardinal's Daughter*, which of course gave away the whole intended dramatic ending. The religious aspects had already been downplayed in an altered version for Vienna in 1836. And there were subsequent productions there early in the twentieth century, with performances conducted by Gustav Mahler, who had previously declared *La Juive* “one of the greatest operas ever created.” But Mahler adored the grandiose. In the late 1980s and early 1990s the opera was transformed into a typically vulgar, shameful Holocaust exploitation for performances in Germany. Yet another disfiguration (though not as offensive) was offered in Vienna at the turn of the twentieth century as a representation of “decadent Austrian nobility,” with Eleazar sung by the American tenor Neil Shicoff, who later sang the role in a more legitimate production at the Metropolitan Opera in New York.



ENDNOTES

- 1 Halévy participated actively in the Jewish communal life of Paris, in particular as a member of the Consistoire Israelite—which, for Jews now as French citizens (“of the Jewish faith”), Napoleon had established. With Judaism now an officially accepted “state religion,” the consistory’s purpose was to regulate and oversee Jewish communal affairs. When the now famous cantor and liturgical composer Samuel Naumbourg, originally from Bavaria, appeared before the Consistoire as an applicant for chief cantor of Paris, Halévy served on the panel that approved his appointment. The two had met earlier, when Naumbourg was officiating at the Great Synagogue in Paris, and Halévy is said to have exerted a strong influence on Naumbourg’s cantorial manner as well as on his style of composition for the liturgy. Halévy composed and contributed his own original, elaborate Hebrew liturgical settings to Naumbourg’s landmark anthology of synagogue music, for which he also invited settings by a number of other Paris cantors and composers. To this day, the most famous of Halévy’s contributions is his superbly artistic—and very French—setting of “*Min hametzar*” for synagogal rendition on the Three Festivals. It is rightly considered one of the classics of the cantorial-choral repertoire.

Even as early as 1820 Halévy composed a funeral march and a setting of *De Profundis* (Psalm 130) in Hebrew on the death of the Duc de Berry, which was performed at a synagogue, Halévy’s father, Elias Levy, came to France from his birthplace in Furth, Bavaria, and was a scholar and a poet. He served for a time as choirmaster at the Central Synagogue on the Rue de la Victoire, and he founded, published, and edited the first French Jewish periodical. In France he altered the family name slightly to Halévy, which simply means “The Levi,” viz., “The Levite,” which apparently sounded more French, yet still Jewish. Elias became imbued with a symbiotic admixture of French republicanism and Jewish liberalism, embracing French reforms of synagogue practice that his son followed in his duality of French and Jewish persona. Halévy’s mother was born in France.

Although Elias’s son was named Jacques at his birth, in 1799, his middle name of Fromenthal (Fromental) was added a bit later by his parents, on the assumption (or so it is said) that it had a liberal republican ring to it (some have referred to it as having a “revolutionary overtone”). Throughout his years as a composer for the Paris Opéra, Halévy used both Jacques Fromenthal and sometimes just Fromental interchangeably.

At Halévy’s funeral, in 1862, the president of the Consistoire delivered the following eulogy, which was printed in *Archives Israélite*:

We are happy to count him as one of us, not only because he brought honor to France, but because he held high the flag of his religion. In these sad times of religious indifference he had the good sense not to deny the faith of our fathers.

- 2 See in Diana R. Hallman, *Opera, Liberalism, and Antisemitism in Nineteenth-Century France: The Politics of Halévy’s La Juive* (Cambridge, England, and NY, 2002). Leon’s comment is quoted therein.
- 3 Ibid., *passim*.
- 4 Richard Taruskin, *The Oxford History of Western Music* (NY, 2005).
- 5 Quoted in Hugh MacDonal, “*La Juive*,” in *The New Grove Dictionary of Opera*, Vol. II (London, 1992).

- 6 Though the town of Constance (Konstanz) is actually in Switzerland, it is quite near the present German border. In the early fifteenth century it was for all intents and purposes German (at least with regard to the opera setting) and part of the Holy Roman Empire. Lake Constance, the English for the Bodensee, is today bordered by three countries: Switzerland, Germany, and Austria, at the shore of Bregenz, Austria's capital city of the Vorarlberg, one of its nine states. Across the lake from Bregenz is the present German state of Baden-Württemberg.
- 7 Scribe (and thus Halévy in following his libretto) engaged in much more than a tolerable amount of poetic license here in manufacturing history. The Hussites were so named as followers of the Bohemian religious reformer and martyr John Huss (in turn a follower of the English religious reformer John Wycliffe, who was burned at the stake largely for his attempt to make an English translation of the Bible, although the Inquisition dreamed up other charges of heresy as well). The so-called Hussite Wars, however, did not take place as early as 1414 and began as a civil war only after Huss's followers banded together after his martyrdom in 1415 and for a while won many military victories over the forces of Rome, the pope, and the Holy Roman Emperor. The Hussites divided into two groups, and the more radical of the two was defeated only in 1434. The Moravian Brethren grew out of that so-called radical group. Thus the fictional character Prince Leopold could not have engaged the Hussites in battle, let alone been victorious, as early as 1414. Scribe in effect seems to have substituted Jewish characters for the condemned John Huss and for Jerome of Prague, a Wycliffe follower and friend of Huss who was also put to death by the council.
- 8 A Jew who had never converted to Christianity and therefore declined participation in Christian events was obviously not a heretic. From religious perspectives he was at most a "denier of the true faith" and a hindrance to the Second Coming. But mobs could use any excuse for the inherited lethal obsession of Jew hatred.
- 9 The "Holy Roman Emperor" Sigismund (1368–1437) initiated and inaugurated the Council of Konstanz in 1414, which, among other supposed "accomplishments," ended the Great Schism within the Church of Rome. In 1414, however, he was not yet the Holy Roman Emperor, the position he attained only in 1433. In the time frame of the opera he was at most a newly crowned German king—crowned in Aachen or possibly Aix-la-Chapelle three days after the council's opening. Sigismund's inclusion in the opera as a "mute" figurehead—not actually taking part in the action—suggests to Hallman (op. cit.) and other critics a matter of self-censorship blatantly political in nature. In that interpretation it was a direct attack on a royal/imperial figure, which, based on other incidents of suppression, was still questionably acceptable even during the relatively liberal period and circles in France. Sigismund is presented as "emperor" only as a product of Scribe's promiscuous interweaving fiction with history, obviously for the purpose of intensifying dramatic effect. Should Sigismund's title in the opera have been "king"? If so, of what area or region? Or perhaps some even less royal title?
- 10 *Matza* is called "the bread of affliction" in the Passover Haggada (*Ho lahma anya . . . kol ditzrikh yeitei v'yifsaḥ* (Let all who are hungry come and eat). There is, however, no acceptable equivalent in any language for *matza*, even though it is rendered unwisely as "unleavened bread" in many if not most translations of the Hebrew Bible. In many cultures there are dozens of varieties of unleavened bread that have nothing whatsoever to do with *matza*. Passover *matza* is Judaically unique. In the rabbinic tradition, Jews are required to eat a minimum portion of *matza* at the seder, "because the dough of our fathers did not have time to rise and become leavened before God revealed Himself to redeem us" with the exodus from Egypt. *Matza* (whose Hebrew roots are the three letters *mem*, *tzadi*, and *hei*) is made from flour and water, kneaded hastily, and baked quickly to prevent any fermentation. Separate cakes or sheets are perforated to keep them from rising during the baking process and put into the oven or fire one at a time. Passover *matza* thus symbolizes the haste with which the

Israelites had to leave Egypt lest the Pharaoh change his mind about releasing them and decide to pursue them—which is what happened in the biblical account, but too late for the Egyptians. Thus it is stated in *D'varim* with reference to the Passover *matza* (Deuteronomy 16): “That you will remember your going out from Egypt all the days of your life.”

Meanwhile, suspicion of the Blood Libel, which began toward the end of the thirteenth century in England and spread all over Europe, became an annual occurrence that terrified Jews in the weeks before Passover. For example, Chaucer (fourteenth century) made use of the charge in his *Canterbury Tales*.

11 A *b'rakha* (pl. *b'rakhot*) is the most basic prayer formula in the Hebrew liturgy. Its incipient stage of development is thought to date to the Tannaitic era (roughly the first and second centuries, CE). But, though talmudic discourse in the ensuing centuries is peppered with discussions and debates, rabbinic consensus about details of wording, syntax, typologies, rationales, rules, and other related issues, the form coalesced into binding standardization only in post-talmudic periods. Simply put, a *b'rakha* is an anaphoric liturgical formula whose original incipit is the phrase *barukh ata adonai* (You are worshipped, *adonai* [the source of blessings]). The remaining words—or those of preceding passages considered part of a particular *b'rakha*—vary, depending upon type or category: acknowledgment of a divine attribute or role; proclamation and affirmation of being the creator of something (a particular food category, for example) or as having mandated or established some procedure, event, aspect of life or nature, or legislation; corroboration or acceptance of God as the sole supreme sovereign of the world and His ultimate authority over it; acknowledgment and fulfillment of a commandment; or, even if implicitly, thanks and praise for a divine gift, judgment, or blessing conferred on one.

B'rakha in the context of this formula, however, has no acceptable English equivalent. All imprecise compromises, e.g., “blessing” or “benediction,” fall far short of the mark and risk misleading unintentionally, even meaning the opposite. For it is obviously not in the domain of mankind to bless or confer blessings on God, which such modern English terms could imply. Within a sentence of any non-Jewish language, therefore, no attempt at translation should be made. *B'rakha* should be left as it is, in the Hebrew.

12 The American Reform movement removed this pronouncement altogether from its revised Passover Haggada, on the grounds that it could be misunderstood and that it appeared vengeful. In fact, it does not apply to any monotheistic religion or people, such as Christians, but only to historically pagan—and thus not God-fearing—peoples who have attempted to destroy the Jewish people. It is simply a prayer for Jewish survival in the face of enemies—viz., “the nations who do not recognize” God.

13 Whether *The Merchant of Venice* should or could be considered an “antisemitic play,” and by extension whether it reflects antisemitism on the part of its playwright, has bedeviled Shakespeare scholars for a long time. Many, however—Jews as well as non-Jews—have not subscribed to that interpretation. Naturally, in sixteenth-century England—under the Church of England—the long-standing stereotype of the Jew as a usurious, avaricious, and anti-Christian moneylender, merchant, or banker prevailed (as it did for centuries afterward, never mind the poverty of most Jews). But the depiction of Shylock is complex, far more so than the comparative simplicity of Eleazar, and the two situations and plots are quite different. Moreover, some see a Shakespearean humanization of Shylock and “the Jews,” as a counterargument to their demonization (“If you prick us, do we not bleed?”). Then, too, it is doubtful whether Shakespeare ever met a Jew (other than an unlikely encounter with one of the illegally but quietly tolerated resident pawnbrokers or the like), since the Jews were expelled en masse from England in 1290 and could not return until the seventeenth century under the Protectorate of the otherwise vicious, murderous dictator Lord Oliver Cromwell.

14 How do we explain the casting of Rachel and Eleazar into a boiling cauldron rather than onto a pyre of burning wood, or otherwise into fire? No even moderately educated person in nineteenth-century France would have been unfamiliar with the infamous historical connection between the execution of heretics and “burning at the stake,” even though the council is not the Inquisition and neither Rachel nor Eleazar could be heretics as Jews. In the draft libretto that Scribe offered Halévy in his invitation to compose the score, he envisioned burning, and Halévy originally intended that to be the ending of the opera as well. Obviously, only later, well in advance of the premiere, did both conclude that the change of boiling to death would be preferable—presumably in accord with the production’s director as well as others involved in the staging. Their reasons remain a matter of speculation. If they thought boiling was somehow more dramatic than being cast into fire, it is difficult to understand why.

In the event, that altered ending, the execution by boiling, became the standard for all subsequent productions that have followed Halévy’s score

It is true that boiling in oil, molten lead, wax, tallow, water, or some other liquid was yet another hideous method of capital punishment dating at least to the Middle Ages in England and Europe—reportedly going back to the Roman Empire vis-à-vis Christian martyrdom. (It was also known in East Asia as well as on the Indian subcontinent for refusal to convert to Islam. The Chinese Imperial Court is believed to have used human boiling for both execution and torture; likewise, Mongol war lords, Mughal emperors, and so on.) But by the Middle Ages and the Renaissance period, the punishment was generally reserved for such religiously unrelated crimes as counterfeiting, poisoning, “coining” or coin “clipping,” and other various crimes. For heretics’ executions, boiling (as opposed to burning) was extremely rare. The one exception that is still occasionally cited was the boiling of a civil law student for alleged heresy in 1556 under the Roman Inquisition. Even then, he was originally sentenced to burning, and the boiling was by order of Pope Paul IV.

It cannot be argued that an exception to the rule was some regional or local custom in Konstanz by the early fifteenth century. John Huss, who was condemned by the council in 1415 for heresy as well as alleged attacks against the Church, was in fact burned at the stake there, his ashes taken to be thrown into the Rhine.

So why did Scribe and Halévy agree before the premiere to substitute boiling for burning? For those curious enough to be bothered by this, it is a frustrating, persistent question that has never had a definitive, satisfactory explanation.

More confusing is that any one of at least several printed librettos contains references in Act IV to the burning of Rachel and Eleazar, whereas Act V in those same librettos specifies in the staging instructions their being cast into a cauldron or vat—presumably of boiling oil, although the type of liquid is not identified. For example, compare the following three sources:

* LIBRETTO PUBLISHED BY
Fred. Rullman inc. NY 1919

LIBRETTO in
Philips CD set, 1989

**SYNOPSIS in Hallman, *Opera,
Liberalism*. op. cit.

ACT V:

ELEAZAR:

*(Regardant Rachel qui vient de monter sur la
plateforme au-dessus de la cuve.)*

OUI!

LA VOILA!

(On précipite Rachel dans le bucher.
Translated in same libretto as “Rachel is
thrown into the boiling water.”)

ACT V: (No stage instructions):

ELEAZAR:

OUI!

LA VOILA!

Same stage instruction, but translated in
same libretto as “Rachel is thrown into
the flames.”

ACT V, Stage instructions (only):

[Description of immense tent, Gothic
columns supporting it with gilded
capitals, overlooking the village of
Constance . . .]

“Eleazar and Rachel led to the scaffold
that stands over the cauldron of boiling
liquid, as executioners hurl Rachel into
the cauldron.”

Eleazar points to Rachel with:

LA VOILA!

* Cover states “Metropolitan Opera House,” so presumably for productions there in New York.

** Hallman did not include a libretto in her book, nor did she specify the particular libretto on which she relied for her synopsis and stage directions/staging.

* * * * *

“*Bucher*” is translated to English in modern French-English/English-French dictionaries as “wood-house,” “funeral pyre,” “pyre,” or “stake.” But the English “vat” is given therein as the French “*cuve*.” The English “flames,” however, would be “*flammes*” in French, which is not in the original French libretto. Moreover, “*cuve*” appears in French-English dictionaries only as the French for “vat.” And Hallman, without explaining her uncertainty, questions whether “*le bucher*” necessarily always means or meant “burning at the stake literally,” even though *bucher* is found in contemporary French-English dictionaries as related to burning (and actually “burning at the stake”), with no other unrelated meanings. (p.c., May 29, 2024.)

- 15 The *halakhic* (Judaic legal) procedure for conversion of a baby or infant girl is rather simple. It involves the adoptive parent(s) taking her to a *mikve* (ritual bath)—or, if none is accessible, to a rippling pool from a stream or river—and immersing her three times in the presence of two Sabbath-observant adult male Jews. She is then a bona fide Jewess. At the age of twelve she has the opportunity to renounce the conversion; otherwise she remains a Jewess for her lifetime. It makes no difference if her biological parent(s) had previously had her baptized as a Christian. And even if Eleazar suspected that, which would have been a reasonable assumption, he would not have wanted anyone (including Rachel) to know about it. Had it been discovered by the Church, she would have been subject to the Inquisition as a baptized Christian heretic.

According to rabbinic statements, a true proselyte is like a born Jew—like a newborn infant (M’khilta 12: 39; Y’vamos 62a). And in a letter to a proselyte, Maimonides wrote, “All who accept Judaism are Abraham’s disciples . . . There is no difference between you and us.”

- 16 Hallman, op. cit., p.c. May 29, 2024; and see in her book *passim*.

- 17 For example, Hallman (p.c., May 29, 2024) has referred to a performance edition by Karl Leich-Galland that has been used for a number of performances and productions. Unsurprisingly, she disagrees with his decision to “recreate the work that Halévy intended, while speculating about or even overriding his intentions rather than honoring Halévy’s approval of the way the opera was galvanized both for the premiere and then immediately afterward—with his participation.” Leich-Galland undid the cuts to Act III that were made by the second performance of *La Juive* at the Paris Opéra, which remained cut in future performances there. He included the overture that was not even written until eight months after the premiere and then rarely performed in Paris. He restored the guitars in Leopold’s serenade, even though Halévy inked them out in his autograph manuscript—among other musical passages he crossed out; and he (Leich-Galland) ignored the performing parts for the first production that reveal what was performed at the Paris Opéra.

Hallman also cautions that what one hears now in theaters or opera houses, as well as on recordings, differs in a number of ways from what was first performed in Paris. The same holds true vis-à-vis various librettos, especially any included with recordings.

- 18 Olivier Bara, “*La Juive de Scribe et Halévy (1835): Un opera juif?*” in *Romantisme* 34, no. 125 (2004).

- 19** On the other hand, Bara proposes that Halévy was at the same time “hiding his origin and culture” so as to develop a new identity. But that is simply not true. Bara seems to be unaware of Halévy’s transparent Jewish activities and affiliations both before *La Juive* and afterward—involvements as a faithful Jew that were praised in his eulogy. She does, however, insightfully recognize a “surprising ignorance” of “religious rites and symbols” in the opera. But it is not clear whether she is referring to Eleazar in Rome before his banishment or to the ignorance assigned to him overall by Scribe and Halévy.
- 20** Alyssa Quint, *The Rise of the Modern Yiddish Theater* (Bloomington, Indiana, 2019).
- 21** The Duchesse de Berry was actually arrested for alleged participation in the “conspiracy.”
- 22** That condemnation was even extended to his father, Emmanuel Deutz, the chief rabbi of France. Meanwhile, elements within the Consistoire took advantage of the whole affair to express their opposition to his conducting services (viz., delivering sermons and perhaps also spoken translations of liturgical passages) in Yiddish, which was held to violate modernity, the rejuvenation of Hebrew as a principle of the Haskala (the Jewish Enlightenment), and the desiderata of French wherever applicable for French citizens of the Jewish faith. Moreover, some elements within the Consistoire even began to advocate for the abolition of the office altogether.
- 23** Several Jews, including children, were imprisoned; and some died under torture.
- 24** N. B. Gorin, *Di Geshikhte fun idishn teater* (NY, 1918).