

## The New Rhetoric Project as a Response to Anti-Semitism: Chaim Perelman's Reflections on Assimilation<sup>1</sup>

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Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca have both been recognized for their tireless efforts on behalf of Jews: Perelman, himself a Jew, was praised for his work with the Jewish Resistance group, the Comité de la Défense des Juifs [CDJ], which was founded in his living room in June 1942; he was also noted for his postwar activities, including the Aliyah Bet movement immediately following the war.<sup>2</sup> Olbrechts-Tyteca, for her part, was honored as one of the 'Righteous among the Nations' by Yad Vashem in 1980 for her work on the Comité des Mairaines [Godmother Committee] founded by Fela Perelman, which hid Belgian Jewish children during the second World War.<sup>3</sup>

The present study does not have Perelman's and Olbrechts-Tyteca's work on behalf of the Jews as its subject; this has been amply described elsewhere (by, among others, Frank 1997, 2003, 2004, 2014; Steinberg 1978; Gross and Dearn 2003). It is rather an exploration of how they (and Perelman in particular) translate their experiences (direct and indirect) of anti-Semitism into the philosophical meditations of the *Traité* and the other writings that make up the New Rhetoric Project [NRP].<sup>4</sup> If, as Amos Kiewe has pointed out, "scholarship on anti-Semitism from a rhetorical perspective is almost none existent" (vii), scholarship on the NRP's response to anti-Semitism is, to date, slim.

My colleague David Frank has cogently unearthed the Jewish foundations of Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca's magnum opus, the *Traité de l'argumentation: La nouvelle rhétorique* (1958), and the way in which Talmudic reasoning is an important feature of the type of argumentation it formulates. If Frank's work suggests the link between Perelman's and Olbrechts-Tyteca's Resistance activities and their search for a logic of value judgments, to date there has not been any discussion of how the *Traité*—or the NRP more broadly—responds to anti-Semitism. But frankly, any such discussion would be a difficult enterprise, because allusions to anti-Semitism are elusive in the *Traité*. In fact, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca take on the question of assimilation rather than the outright and violent acts of anti-Semitism; even this in the *Traité* tends to be implicit.<sup>5</sup> As a result, in order to understand the NRP as a response to anti-Semitism, we must ferret out nuanced references to assimilation in the *Traité*, and, more importantly, look to other more overt statements on assimilation in the additional materials—articles, lectures, and even notebooks—that comprise the NRP.

Readers of Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca's work, especially in North America, who most often come to the NRP through the 1969 English translation of the *Traité* may find the premise that it overtly responds to anti-Semitism, or even to assimilation, surprising, even if, as Susan Handelman has insightfully remarked, Perelman's rhetoric is "dependent upon a relation to an other" (602). This response is not, on the surface, wrong, for the *Traité* does not explicitly treat either assimilation or anti-Semitism, nor does it overtly promote argumentation as a means of combatting the latter; nowhere in its pages do Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca make reference to their work to support and save Jews during and immediately following

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<sup>2</sup> As a part of this movement, in July 1946, Perelman and his wife Fela organized a boat for the immigration of Jews to Palestine, which was illegal at the time. See Michman 527. I would also point out that Perelman was also an important member of the UNESCO Committee of Experts on the Philosophical Principles of the Rights of Man convened in Paris in 1947.

<sup>3</sup> See Michman on Fela's activities hiding children (esp. 248, 310).

<sup>4</sup> This is not to say, of course, that Olbrechts-Tyteca as a non-Jew had a first-hand experience of anti-Semitism, nor that Perelman experienced anti-Semitism only during the Occupation, particularly since he had been in Warsaw studying logic precisely when the ghetto benches were instituted.

<sup>5</sup> If, as we will see, Perelman considers assimilation as a demand imposed on the Jews by the community in which they are a minority and thus as a form of anti-Semitism, other more recent scholars see it as a danger internal to the Jewish community. Dershowitz, for example, begins his work on the disappearing Jew in the United States by writing: "The good news is that American Jews—as individuals—have never been more secure, more accepted, more affluent, and less victimized by discrimination or anti-Semitism. The bad news is that American Jews—as a people—have never been in greater danger of disappearing through assimilation, intermarriage, and low birthrates" (1).

the war, even if anecdotes from the Belgian Occupation do appear.<sup>6</sup> In fact, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca make but a single reference to Adolf Hitler within their exploration of how terms function within philosophical pairs. In this example, they explicate the term “eternal”:

The adjective ‘eternal’ thus designates a term II [of a philosophical pair]: for the Germans who were opponents of the Third Reich, ‘eternal Germany’ was the true Germany, in opposition to Nazi Germany, thus described as transitory and apparent. For Hitler, however, when joined to ‘Germany’, this adjective was only a form of the superlative. (*Traité* 587; *New Rhetoric* 442<sup>7</sup>)

This allusion surprises for its even-handed, rather detached tone, all the while illustrating how the meaning of a term II of a philosophical pair is unstable, changing in time and according to the audience that holds it as valuable. In choosing this particular example to disclose how dissociation can affect the nature of the second term, so that here “eternal” is in fact anything but, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca do more than elide “eternal” to “appearance” and thus to the philosophical pair of appearance/reality.<sup>8</sup> In fact, with this example, which obviously indicates a postwar perspective, they delicately establish here an image of Germany that conflicts with that held by, and associated with, Hitler; they deny the notion that Germany is to be eternally equated with the Third Reich. We can easily imagine how they, and Perelman in particular, might have been personally invested in the dissociation of Nazism from Germany: Germany had much to offer to such a cosmopolitan philosopher as Perelman, who had written his dissertation on the German philosopher Gottlob Frege, and who directly after the end of the war had insisted upon visiting Germany.<sup>9</sup> Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca’s reference to Germany in relation to eternal as an example of how the meaning of a term within a philosophical pair can change is thus marked by traces—although curiously impassive—of their real-life experiences of both the Germany lauded for its philosophical and philological prowess, and the Germany associated with the Hitlerian Totalitarianism they had experienced under the Occupation. It is, however, hardly an impassioned declaration against anti-Semitism.

The emotional restraint with which Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca make reference to Hitler, Nazi Germany, and the Third Reich is also remarkably evident in an early Belgian review of the *Traité* by Isaye Gaston. When Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca clarify that they fight against philosophical oppositions and absolutisms by employing the term *combattre*, Gaston pauses in his analysis in order to deny that this term and, by extension the *Traité* as a whole, is aggressive. He writes, “If the authors show some emotion here, it is because they fight only to defend, in order to protect eminently respectable human convictions that are perfectly reasonable even if they are not analyzed or even able to be analyzed in a purely formalist system” (641). Uneasy, Gaston posits the threat of violence underlying their use of *combattre* as purely defensive; he thus seems to insist upon reading *combattre* in the very same understated, even muted fashion that we have seen used by Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca themselves in the example above.

But Gaston is all too ready to minimize the political subtext of the sentence in which *combattre* appears (as *combattons*). The sentence in question—“We fight against the categorical and intransigent philosophical oppositions that every type of absolutism presents to us” [Nous combattons les oppositions philosophiques, tranchées et irréductibles, que nous présentent les absolutismes de toute espèce” (*Traité* 676; *New Rhetoric* 510)]—is significant semantically, for Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca use terms whose lexical valence calls to mind the French Revolution for the careful reader of the French original.<sup>10</sup> At first reading, *tranchée* evokes not the figurative ‘categorical’ as I have translated it above but rather the more literal ‘cut’ because of its syntactic bond with *absolutisme*, which refers to systems of government in which the ruler holds

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<sup>6</sup> See, in particular, the section § 38 on verbal forms, in which they discuss the use of the term “boche” used at the time, and the anecdote of the ninety-year-old aristocrat’s punning retort to the German general who had expropriated her house. *Traité* 201, 204; *New Rhetoric* 149, 151.

<sup>7</sup> I provide references to Wilkinson and Weaver’s English translation of the *Traité* for the reader’s convenience; however, all translations of Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca’s work here (including the *Traité*, but not the *New Rhetoric and the Humanities*) are mine.

<sup>8</sup> In her 1979 article “Les Couples philosophiques”, Olbrechts-Tyteca pairs “approximation” with “eternity” (84).

<sup>9</sup> See Crosswhite’s anecdote, which records Perelman commenting that the devastated Germany he saw was “not Europe.” See Crosswhite, 136.

<sup>10</sup> A more neutral translation of *combattons* in this sentence could have been “are opposed to,” which would erase the allusion to revolution all together; Wilkinson and Weaver use the lexically related “combat,” which has an element of abstraction missing in “fight against.”

divine power without the limits imposed by constitutional laws, as was established in France by Louis XIV.<sup>11</sup> As a result, *tranchée* evokes the guillotine, and *absolutisme*, the absolute, divine power of the king that was so violently contested—combatted—during the French Revolution.<sup>12</sup> The French Revolution thus underlies this phrase, and Gaston, a Jesuit priest and professor at the Université Catholique de Louvain (Belgium), was perhaps (with reason) eager to abate the underlying allusion to the French Revolution, insisting on Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca's use of *combattre* as illustrating their defense of philosophical flexibility and nuance.<sup>13</sup>

A reader aware of what the French Revolution meant for Jews in particular may read this same sentence with an additional, more contemporary, and for the purposes of Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca's *Traité*, more relevant resonance, for it carries with it the question of assimilation. Let me clarify. Emancipation of the Jews was for some, particularly Mirabeau and the Abbé Grégoire, a Revolutionary goal, and the decree of 27 September 1791 emancipated the Jews, recognizing for the first time in law the Jews as full-fledged French citizens.<sup>14</sup> However, the universalism espoused by the French Revolution simultaneously denied the possibility of plurality, and for the Jews, of retaining their religion and cultural traditions.<sup>15</sup> As Perelman writes in 1979, "In order to be able, under the guidance of reason, to share the same truths, men also forget their beliefs and creeds, the heritage of history, tradition and culture, all equally disqualified as prejudices. This would be the utopia of the universal society based on reason, the avowed ideal of the French Revolution" (*New Rhetoric and the Humanities* 69–70). The legal recognition of the Jews thus prompted the beginning of the difficult dilemma that was Jewish assimilation; for Arthur Hertzberg, the recognition of a legal status for the Jews did not constitute an unqualified triumph, but rather, the seeds of anti-Semitism.<sup>16</sup> As a result, the lexical valence of Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca's concluding thoughts in the *Traité* that make Gaston so uncomfortable—their opposition to (and their combat against) philosophical absolutism—thus also suggests the weight of the universalist ideals of the French Revolution and the burden of assimilation inscribed therein. As Hannah Arendt declares "Assimilation is the entrance of the Jews into the historical European world" ("Original Assimilation" in *The Jewish Writings* 22).<sup>17</sup> We can conclude, then, that one of the forms of absolutism that they reject in the *Traité* is universalism's historical requirement of Jews to assimilate.

To be fair, few readers would draw so much meaning from one sentence among many in the *Traité*; it is, after all, 733 pages long, and the French Revolution does not figure therein.<sup>18</sup> However, the reader of the

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<sup>11</sup> Here, I recall I.A. Richards, who writes, "A word may be *simultaneously* both literal and metaphoric, just as it may simultaneously support many different metaphors, may serve to focus into one meaning many different meanings" (118-19).

<sup>12</sup> A sensitive reader might also go so far as to associate their description of absolutism with the Totalitarian system and its absolute ruler—Hitler—under whose rule they lived during the Occupation.

<sup>13</sup> Curiously, Gaston was known for the formation of an argumentation of retaliation [l'argumentation par rétorsion]. See Jean Ladrière's memorializing preface to Gaston's *L'Affirmation de l'être*, see 19-21. Gaston may have had first-hand experience of retaliation, practiced particularly between in August 1914 by the Germans against Belgian citizens considered to be snipers. In addition, the library of the Catholic University of Louvain where Gaston worked for decades was entirely destroyed by fire twice, in August 1914 and again in May 1940. See Lousse's volume of the history of the Catholic University of Louvain. See Berkovitz on the various formulations of 'émancipation', and its three-fold evolution (57-78)

<sup>14</sup> The exhaustive *La Révolution française et l'émancipation des juifs* contains the many decrees aimed at Jews, as well as at Blacks, and other populations on the margins of French society (see esp. volume 7, which records the debates—including comments by the Abbé Grégoire and Mirabeau—and the accompanying documents of the Assemblée Nationale on the emancipation of the Jews). Badinter usefully notes the plurality of Jewish communities at the time, which renders the 'Jewish Question' more complex than one might otherwise imagine. Berkovitz cogently argues that the French Revolution was the first and the most important, but not the only, factor that left an important mark on Jewish consciousness; moreover, he explores how the concept of *régénération*, which marked the idea of emancipation, was understood radically by the French, who expected a secular rebirth and a rupture with the past, and much less radically by Jews in France, who saw it as holding promise of a restoration of Jewish traditions and identity (45–48). I would recall that the Abbé Grégoire was the author of the important *Essai sur la régénération physique, morale et politique des juifs* (1789).

<sup>15</sup> I am well aware that the French Revolution of 1789 went through many phases and, as Szajkowski's titles indicates, there were in fact a series of "French Revolutions."

<sup>16</sup> As Szajkowski describes, even after the Terror (i.e., after 1794), anti-Semitism was widespread. 422–33. Berkovitz describes the precarious, and impoverished, situation of Jewish communities in Alsace-Lorraine following the Revolution (49–56). Marrus, on the other hand, shows how late nineteenth-century Jews in France developed a theory of 'Franco-Judaism' deriving from the French Revolution and its emancipation, even redemption, of the Jews (86-121).

<sup>17</sup> Arendt's essay is titled in full "Original Assimilation: An Epilogue to the One Hundredth Anniversary of Rachel Varnhagen's death" (*The Jewish Writings*, 22-30).

<sup>18</sup> However, scholars do employ the *Traité* in order to analyze the French Revolution; Rigney applies the *Traité's* rhetoric as a means to qualify Lamartine's historical account of the insurrection of 10 August 1792 Revolution as rhetorical (esp. 73-75).

original French *Traité* immediately recognizes the polysemy of this sentence that troubles Gaston, understanding that underneath such terms as *combattons*, *tranchée*, and *absolutisme* lies the vast history of the French Revolution and its mixed consequences for Jews. Indeed, for our purposes, this reference to the French Revolution is significant, for it helps us to sketch out the outlines of the *Traité* as a response to the Enlightenment's peculiar form of anti-Semitism, assimilation.<sup>19</sup>

Reading the French Revolution as tied to, and a symbol of, assimilation for Perelman will perhaps make more sense when we realize that he was acutely interested in the questions of liberty and the rights of citizens that the Revolution posed. His notebooks, for example, show him reading and taking notes from Jean Belin's 1939 *La logique d'une idée-force: l'idée d'utilité sociale et la révolution française*.<sup>20</sup> In his notes, Perelman draws conclusions from Belin's work that will later inform his work on law (he sees, for instance, an evolution of liberty, which, at first an exception, becomes a rule and then a legal obligation); moreover, he takes care to note both Berlin's vision of the French Revolution as a reversal of earlier conceptions of particular liberties (i.e., privileges accorded based on social status) and, moreover, Belin's association of liberty with equality, the well-known motto of France deriving from the French Revolution.<sup>21</sup> Perelman's notes on Belin's work suggest, then, that the French Revolution holds epistemological importance for him; it marks not only the ideals of the Enlightenment with which Perelman is philosophically engaged (i.e., not only liberty and equality but also formal reasoning and logical positivism), but also his personal preoccupation with the problem of assimilation.

The *Traité's* allusion to the French Revolution is thus a subtle means of evoking the drama of assimilation. If after the French Revolution, assimilation had ambiguous consequences for the Jews—who gained legal rights at the price of losing their religion and culture—it was an even more pressing (and in many ways less ambiguous) issue in the 1930s. Hannah Arendt, writing in 1935, manifests the exigency felt by Jews to work out the question of assimilation: “The question of or success or failure of assimilation is more urgent than ever precisely for assimilated Jews. For assimilation is a fact, and only later, in the context of defensive struggle, does it become an ideology; an ideology one today knows cannot maintain itself because reality has refuted it more fully and unambiguously than ever before (“Original Assimilation” in *The Jewish Writings* 22). Even prior to the war Arendt expresses the increasing sentiment that assimilation has not, and would not, work out in the Jews' favor. Her conclusion a few years later is definitive: assimilation is not only impractical, but is to be equated to the Jews' extinction: “Only assimilation on an international scale, which would be tantamount to the disappearance of the Jews, or a social order that knows no opposing international interests could put an end to the fact that there are differences of interests” (“Antisemitism” in *The Jewish Writings* 51).<sup>22</sup>

The *Traité* includes at least one instance, if implicit, that points to the question of assimilation. Consider Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca's contrast of the two different forms of argument construction, hypotactic versus paratactic (§39). David Frank has perceptively argued that the paratactic construction of argument derives from a Hebrew model of argumentation, unveiling how Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca privilege it over the Greek and Roman preference for the hypotactic, in part because the paratactic insists upon the notion of liberty (“Jewish Countermodel” 177–78).<sup>23</sup> Their presentation of the two forms of argumentation is indeed important for discerning how the paratactic is of Hebrew origin, offering a vision of

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<sup>19</sup> As Arendt asserted in 1938, “Assimilation always meant assimilation to *the Enlightenment*” (“Original Assimilation” in *The Jewish Writings* 22). Arendt later identifies assimilation as a problem that begins in the time of the French Revolution: “But the problem of Jewish assimilation begins only *after* the Enlightenment, first in the generation followed Mendelssohn [d. 1786]” (“Original Assimilation” in *The Jewish Writings* 23).

<sup>20</sup> See the notebook he had begun in May 1935. Archives Perelman 89 PP 12, carnet 7, pp. 116–117.

<sup>21</sup> In fact, Belin notes (as Perelman records on p. 117 of this notebook), liberty can only be operative in a field of action if there is equality.

<sup>22</sup> Part of the problem, Arendt notes, is a denial of particularity and difference in the population at large. She writes, “All theories that see Jewish salvation in assimilation are based on an assumption that the host people are unified, undifferentiated, so that Jews would become German citizens but of Jewish faith” (“Antisemitism” in *The Jewish Writings* 53).

<sup>23</sup> *Traité* 213 [*New Rhetoric* 158]: “La construction hypotactique est la construction argumentative par excellence: elle serait selon Auerbach—par opposition à la construction paratactique propose à la culture hébraïque—caractéristique des écrits gréco-romains. L'hypotaxe crée des cadres, constitue une prise de position. Elle commande au lecteur, l'oblige à voir certaines relations, limite les interprétations qu'il pourrait prendre en considération, s'inspire du raisonnement juridique bien construit. La parataxe laisse plus de liberté, ne semble vouloir imposer aucun point de vue....”

Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca's rhetoric as Jewish. Moreover, when we look more closely at their reasoning, we also see how the question of assimilation is embedded in their depiction of hypotaxis. That is, their description of hypotactic construction of argument depends upon the example of how a fourth-century Roman emperor who had renounced religion treated the Jews of his realm. As they write, "This is how the benevolent clemency of Julian the Apostate was curiously shown toward the Jews: "They [the Jews] are compatible [i.e., they fit in] with the Gentiles, except for their belief in a single God, which is particular to them, and foreign to us. All the rest we have in common" (*Traité* 211–12; *New Rhetoric* 157).<sup>24</sup> This example thus poses in plain sight the question of Jewish assimilation in the *Traité*, even if it situates it in the far-off, late Roman past; it also suggests that the way in which assimilated Jews were treated by their host cultures could be arbitrary, depending on a ruler's politics or personality.<sup>25</sup>

Although the *Traité* compels readers to analyze the question of assimilation in something of a hide-and-seek manner, assimilation was central for Perelman, as much a personal as an ideological issue. As a Zionist who refused to leave his adopted country of Belgium in the years leading up to the Belgian Occupation and even after the creation of the State of Israel, Perelman grappled personally and philosophically with the notion of assimilation. But we must look beyond the boundaries of the *Traité* to acknowledge just how important assimilation is in Perelman's broader philosophical endeavor. In 1935 he published a short essay on assimilation in *La Tribune juive* entitled "Reflections on Assimilation" ["Réflexions sur l'assimilation"]; he wrote a second, unpublished essay by the same name sometime after 1948, and continued to lecture on the subject into the early 1960s.<sup>26</sup> Despite their similarity in title and subject matter, these works are not identical; indeed, they provide not only a means for understanding the evolution of Perelman's thought on assimilation, but also the necessary background for understanding the *Traité's* veiled allusions to it.

In his 1935 article on assimilation, Perelman distinguishes two different types of assimilation: the first, demanded by others, is marked as individual and highly psychological in nature; the second, the form of which one chooses, is the assimilation of a group rather than an individual, and thus sociological in nature.<sup>27</sup> The first, based on an unreasonable obligation to be pleasing to many different people at the same time, is ultimately impossible and essentially auto-destructive. According to this formulation, assimilation is when others require us not simply to be one thing or another, but instead, no longer to exist, to disappear, in order to be pleasing (or at least, not to be displeasing) to them.<sup>28</sup> Given that he writes in 1935, Perelman's portrayal of this type of assimilation is prescient and chilling: to assimilate in this way means "being a follower of any doctrine, of any ideal which allows you to disappear, in order to disappear. Living incognito and, if this is impossible, showing a false passport. Eternally hunted, trembling at the sound of your own name. And, finally, being discovered, accused of treason, of using false papers. Being vomited out like an insidious poison, yes poison, because insidious. Must a gentleman hide himself so much?"<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> *Traité* 211–12 [*New Rhetoric* 157]: "Voilà comment reflète curieusement la bienveillante indulgence de Julien l'Apostate envers les juifs: 'Ils s'accordent avec les gentils, à l'exception de leur croyance en un seul Dieu. Cela leur est spécial et nous est étranger. Tout le reste nous est commun....'" Adler describes Julian's clemency as regards the Jews as remarkable, as he was known for his hatred of Christians.

<sup>25</sup> This is suggested, I think, by their use of "curieusement" preceding "la bienveillante indulgence."

<sup>26</sup> The undated essay, "Réflexions sur l'assimilation", and the lecture note cards, entitled "Rationalisme et assimilation" are included in 89 PP 17.4 of the Archives Perelman, Université Libre de Bruxelles. I thank Prof. Emmanuelle Danblon and Ingrid Mayeur for making the consultation of these materials possible. The 1935 article will appear in English as a part of the NEH-sponsored translation and commentary on which Professor David Frank and I are currently working.

<sup>27</sup> If Perelman's sociological perspective may have been influenced by Dupréel's *Le pluralisme sociologique* (see his "Philosophy of Pluralism" in *The New Rhetoric and the Humanities*, 63–65), it was also a response to Bernstein's work on the Jewish question, which makes use of a sociological approach but, as Perelman laments in his review of Bernstein's work that appeared in the July 1935 issue of *La Tribune juive* ("Une conception sociologique de la question juive"), one marked by a deductive, and thus far too abstract, method (52).

<sup>28</sup> Perelman writes, "...on exigera de nous, pour ne pas déplaire, non pas d'être tel ou tel, mais de ne plus être; de disparaître pour plaire."

<sup>29</sup> "Réflexions sur l'assimilation" (1935): "Être partisan de toutes les doctrines, de tous les idéaux permettant de se perdre, pour se perdre. Vivre incognito et, si c'est impossible, exhiber un faux passeport. Eternel traqué, trembler au son de son nom qui est le sien. Et, enfin, être découvert, accusé de trahison, d'usage de faux papiers. Être vomé comme un poison insidieux: oui poison, parce que insidieux. Un honnête homme a-t-il besoin de tant se cacher?"

The second form of assimilation, on the other hand, is open-ended, and Perelman declares that to assimilate for oneself is to choose to live a better life; it is to choose the form in which one's belonging to the group that is Judaism will take.<sup>30</sup> However, it is clear that Perelman advocates assimilating as a Jew aware of, and adhering to, the traditional spiritual values of Judaism; while it is possible to deny one's Judaism, he says, it is only an assimilation that is limited to the values that are allowed by Judaism, and whose adoption will not betray Jewish values, that can be enriching and productive.<sup>31</sup> He concludes this article on a note of glory: to assimilate in this way means fully belonging to one's social group. As a result, it means "fully knowing, studying, appreciating, and exalting Jewish ideology by affirming the value of Jewish culture and what Jews have given to the world; it means affirming proudly and gloriously the fact of belonging to the group that is Judaism, such that all Jews will respect this Jewish honor."<sup>32</sup>

In this early consideration of assimilation, then, Perelman uses both sociology and psychology as a means of promoting a rather peculiar form of assimilation.<sup>33</sup> That is, he contrasts the traditional form of assimilation posited by the Enlightenment values sketched out by the French Revolution—in which everyone must adhere to values deemed as universal (and which may thus be opposed to particular values), and everyone must adopt a single identity, that of the ideal vision of the majority—by proposing that there are at least two forms of assimilation. More important, he suggests that the second form allows, even depends upon, belonging to a particular group. In fact, he warns that even if a man is unaware, or disdainful, of his Jewish heritage, he will remain Jewish by virtue of belonging to the social group that is Judaism.<sup>34</sup> Written in 1935, this essay charges the readers of the *Tribune juive* to remake, even reinvent, assimilation so that it comprises and honors Jewish values; assimilation in this light may no longer be a form of anti-Semitism in which Jews must deny Judaism in order to please the non-Jewish culture within which they live.

Here I must pause to acknowledge that Perelman's writings on assimilation are very much tied to the idea of the "Jewish Question," initially posed by Theodor Herzl in 1896, and on which Arendt wrote frequently in the 1930s.<sup>35</sup> Arendt's vision of the Jewish Question is useful in that it foregrounds how assimilation and anti-Semitism are keys to understanding the Jewish Question. In 1932 Arendt posits the origins of the Jewish Question to the Enlightenment ("The Enlightenment and the Jewish Question" in *The Jewish Writings* 3).<sup>36</sup> A few years later, Arendt characterizes the Jewish Question as one of assimilation: "The Jewish question is a genuine question or a genuine problem—which means that there can be historical solutions—wherever truly large masses of people reside in the midst of another people from whom they are clearly set off by custom, wardrobe, the monopolization of certain professions, and historical development" ("The Jewish Question" in *The Jewish Writings* 44).<sup>37</sup>

Perelman's article of the same name appeared in 1946; it was, after his book on justice, one of the first postwar articles he published. Like Arendt, he posits the Jewish Question as a very genuine, even urgent problem with a specific set of solutions—to settle homeless Jewish victims of Hitler's persecution in the only

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<sup>30</sup> "Réflexions sur l'assimilation" (1935): "S'assimiler, à cause de soi, pour vivre une plus belle vie. En abandonnant sa personnalité ou en l'amplifiant; en délaissant ce qu'on possède de spécifiquement juif en soi, ou en l'enrichissant."

<sup>31</sup> "Réflexions sur l'assimilation" (1935): "cette assimilation ne peut s'appliquer qu'aux valeurs tolérées par le judaïsme, celles que l'on peut adopter sans trahir ses propres valeurs juives."

<sup>32</sup> "Réflexions sur l'assimilation" (1935): "Qu'il faut donc connaître, étudier, apprécier, exalter, en affirmant la valeur de la culture juive, de l'idéologie juive, de l'apport des Juifs au monde des humains. Et en affirmant son appartenance au groupe juif, fièrement, glorieusement, en faisant respecter l'honneur juif, reflet de la valeur du groupe juif dans chacun de ses membres."

<sup>33</sup> Handelman's analysis of Perelman's 'third way'—a rhetorical way out of the philosophical dualisms enshrined by the Enlightenment—is useful here (602–603).

<sup>34</sup> "Réflexions sur l'assimilation" (1935): "... même si on ignore ou méprise l'idéologie et les valeurs spirituelles du judaïsme, on reste encore Juif par un autre aspect de sa personnalité, l'aspect social, celui où il ne s'agit pas d'idées, mais de groupes."

<sup>35</sup> It might be useful to recall that Perelman grew up with a portrait of Herzl hanging on the wall. See Frank, "Jewish Rhetoric" 80. Herzl used this phrase, "The Jewish Question", to describe how Jews might survive complete annihilation; a Zionist, Herzl proposed the creation of a secular Jewish state.

<sup>36</sup> "The Enlightenment and the Jewish Question," written in 1932, in *The Jewish Writings*, 2–18.

<sup>37</sup> "The Jewish Question", written in 1937 or 1938, in *The Jewish Writings* 42–45. In this article, Arendt argues that Jews on the whole are not interested in dealing with anti-Semitism, but rather with *teshuvah*, or repentance, which she characterizes as a return to the Jewish ghetto. Further, she suggests that the Jewish question is only raised in industrially underdeveloped countries where there is a significant population of Jews with legal rights and some social and economic power; the "Jewish Question" according to the characterization, should not be applied to 1933 Germany, but rather to a country such as Poland.

country willing to accept them, Palestine, and to abolish the British “White Paper” of 1939, which made such immigration illegal.<sup>38</sup> However, Perelman’s “Jewish Question” differs from that of Arendt’s on several levels: first, it proposes what may be called a sociological view of anti-Semitism, defining the conflict between Jews and Christians as one of competing groups.<sup>39</sup> As Perelman writes, “In fact, anti-Semitism is only one particular case of a very widespread phenomenon: group opposition. It is a distinctive feature of any social group, whatever it may be, to object to other groups, especially those that are of the same type. We have pointed to the particular case of the opposition of Christianity to Judaism, but this phenomenon appears frequently not only among religious groups, but also among national, professional, sporting groups, etc.” (55).<sup>40</sup> Second, unlike Arendt, Perelman in this article provides a lengthy diachronic and historical analysis as a frame through which to grasp how the Jewish Question is still, in 1946, a concern despite the victory over Nazism.<sup>41</sup> Perelman thus argues that the Jewish present is tied to the past by the same kind of inter-group conflict and anti-Semitism that Jews have witnessed for centuries.<sup>42</sup>

But Perelman does not rest with this conclusion that the Jewish Question is and has always been sociological in nature. Again, he poses it as a very specific and pressing postwar problem: where are Jewish refugees, and particularly those from Eastern Europe, to go, now that they are homeless and effectively stateless? Given the urgency of the situation, and how involved Perelman was after the war in the clandestine passage of Jewish refugees to Palestine, it is not surprising that the tenor of his conclusion is quite emotional: “From every camp in Europe, across every border, thousands of refugees flow toward the banks of the Promised Land. They have nothing left to lose, and Palestine constitutes their only hope. The English have mobilized a large part of their Navy to chase these small boats that bring desperate Jews from all over to the country of their ancestors. The boats are confiscated, the people are sent to camps in Cyprus, but the flood continues....” (63).<sup>43</sup> For readers accustomed to the dry, detached tone of the *Traité*, Perelman’s impassioned description here is surprising; the striking final ellipsis lends even greater urgency to his plea. Perelman’s article on the Jewish Question is thus an emotional expression of the devastating consequences of institutionalized anti-Semitism.

Despite the emotional power of its plea to open Palestine to Jewish emigration, “The Jewish Question” is also a circumspect exploration of assimilation. Indeed, Perelman specifically situates the roots of this problem in the late nineteenth century, locating assimilation in Western Europe, and Zionism—the result of the impossibility to assimilate—in Eastern Europe.<sup>44</sup> Such a move recalls how Arendt in 1935 linked the

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<sup>38</sup> “La Question juive” 61-62: “Le seul pays qui était prêt à leur offrir un asile définitif était la Palestine, mais les dispositions du Livre Blanc de 1939 n’en accordaient plus l’entrée qu’à quelques dizaines de milliers de personnes.... [...] La politique du Livre Blanc allait-elle se perpétuer? Comment pouvait-on considérer que la Palestine devait fournir aux Juifs un Foyer Nationale, si les victimes sans foyer de la persécution ne pouvaient y être admises?”

<sup>39</sup> Perelman is not alone in using a sociological perspective to understand anti-Semitism. See, more recently Fein, ed. In her preface, Fein insists that a sociological perspective is, for one, diachronic: “The sociological perspective requires complementary historical and comparative analyses to answer the question it poses: How is antisemitism similar to and dissimilar from other cases of inter-group hostility?” (ix). Unlike Herzl, Perelman, and more recently Dershowitz (8) who see it as a problem for Jews as a group, Arendt in 1935 writes that “The Jewish question becomes a problem of the individual Jew” (“Original Assimilation” in *The Jewish Writings* 23).

<sup>40</sup> “La Question juive” 55: “En fait, l’antisémitisme n’est qu’un cas particulier d’un phénomène très répandu, qui est celui de l’opposition des groupes. C’est le caractère de tout groupe social, quelqu’il soit, de s’opposer à d’autres groupes, surtout à ceux de même espèce. Ce phénomène, dont nous avons signalé un cas particulier dans l’opposition du christianisme au judaïsme, se présente couramment non seulement entre groupes religieux, mais aussi entre groupes nationaux, professionnels, sportifs, etc.”

<sup>41</sup> He reiterates the problem of Jews being without a past, as posed by Arendt: “Once they have been deprived of their own past, present reality begins to reveal its power” (“The Enlightenment and the Jewish Question” in *The Jewish Writings*, 16).

<sup>42</sup> In his 1935 review “Une conception sociologique”, Perelman states quite simply that it is anti-Semitism that obliges Jews to become aware of a Jewish question: “C’est l’antisémitisme, sous ses diverses formes, qui oblige la plupart des Juifs à se rendre compte d’une question juive” (51).

<sup>43</sup> “La Question juive”: “De tous les camps d’Europe, à travers toutes les frontières, des milliers de réfugiés affluent vers les rives de la Terre Promise. Ils n’ont plus rien à perdre et la Palestine constitue leur seul espoir. Les Anglais ont mobilisé une grande partie de leur flotte pour faire la chasse aux petits bateaux qui, de toute part, amènent des Juifs désespérés dans le pays de leurs ancêtres. Les bateaux sont confisqués, les gens sont envoyés dans des camps à Chypre, mais le flot continue....”

<sup>44</sup> “La Question juive” 56-57: “Mais alors que les idées libérales avaient favorisé en Europe occidentale un fort courant d’assimilation, l’hostilité dont ils étaient entourés en Europe orientale contribua à rendre vivant l’idéal national, dont le souffle parcourt les écrits religieux juifs.” [“But whereas in Western Europe liberal ideas had favored a strong current of assimilation, the hostility with which [Jews] were surrounded in Eastern Europe contributed to bringing to life the ideal of having a nation, the spirit of which runs through Jewish religious writings.”]

failure of assimilation to Zionism, and, as we will see below, how Perelman will sometime after 1948 consider the State of Israel as a solution to the conflict of norms and values experienced by assimilated Jews. And yet if Perelman determines that the emigration of Eastern European Jewish refugees to Palestine is the solution to the Jewish Question in 1946, nowhere does he propose that all Jews must or should emigrate there. In other words, Perelman seems to craft a dual response to the Jewish Question, one of which still seems to involve assimilation.

We cannot state with certainty that Perelman is proposing in “The Jewish Question” assimilation for some Jews; his overt and expressed goal is to find a way for Jews from Eastern Europe to be able to emigrate safely and legally. And yet, it may be helpful to remember that despite all they did for Jewish emigration to Palestine, the Perelmans themselves did not choose to emigrate. Indeed, Perelman was tied to his identity as both Belgian and Jewish; being faithful simultaneously to both Jewish and Belgian values shapes his thoughts on assimilation, and vice versa. Perelman’s personal response to anti-Semitism can be described by the conception of “double fidelité,” which Frank identifies as “an elegant solution to the Enlightenment paradox” that was “translated into the philosophical aspirations of the NRP” (“Jewish Rhetoric” 80, 88).<sup>45</sup> If, as I believe, double fidelity fashions a coherent and rhetorical response to the anti-Semitic form of assimilation that compelled Jews to forgo Judaism in order to embrace universal values, it is also very present in its absence in the conclusion to “The Jewish Question.”

“The Jewish Question” will inform Perelman’s later work on assimilation. In an undated essay clearly written after 1948, he once again takes up the question of assimilation, and once again from a sociological perspective. The war, and the difficulties of emigration to Palestine, had taken its toll, and Perelman, no longer optimistically reinventing assimilation as he did in 1935, instead turns to Zionism. In this, he recalls Arendt’s view, who already in the late 1930s had made of Zionism a direct result of the failure of assimilation.<sup>46</sup> He explains that when Jews live freely in a culture that is nevertheless not their own, their norms end up being in competition with national norms. The State of Israel, as a result, helps to create a uniform set of Jewish national values: “from the Jewish point of view, the incontestable superiority of the State of Israel is that the norms that it formulates are those that are usual in a national community that is predominantly Jewish.”<sup>47</sup> Perelman concludes the essay by asserting that working against assimilation is a means of protecting the Jewish community:

Insofar as it should safeguard the essential of Judaism, the struggle against assimilation thus coincides with the fight for the traditional values of Judaism, which implies, for Jewish dignity, the knowledge of its past; for the survival of the Jewish community, the embodiment of an experience of culture and of a message whose impact, unique in the history of mankind, is universal.<sup>48</sup>

In this post-1948 essay, Perelman thus no longer describes assimilation as having two forms: one which is psychologically (and potentially more) damaging; the other which affirms the value of Jewish culture and what it has given to the world. Instead, he proposes that the State of Israel offers Jews a means to escape the contradiction that is assimilation. Rather than being caught between the press of the ostensibly universal values of a non-Jewish national culture and the pull of traditional Jewish values, Jews living in Israel may experience a seamless merging of values.

April 1962 finds Perelman lecturing on “Rationalism and Assimilation.”<sup>49</sup> In many ways, this lecture is explicit precisely there where the *Traité* is circumspect. For example, in this lecture he retraces the history of the French Revolution’s emphasis on universalism as a marker of Enlightenment rationality; moreover, and

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<sup>45</sup> As its title indicates, Schreiber’s unpublished analytical biography of Perelman insists on this notion of double fidelité.

<sup>46</sup> She argues that “Zionism is the heir of assimilation: arose as assimilation foundered, and is consequence of a faded emancipation” (“Antisemitism” in *The Jewish Writings* 56).

<sup>47</sup> “Réflexions sur l’assimilation” (ca. 1949): “Et, en fait, la supériorité indéniabile, au point de vue juif, de l’Etat d’Israël, c’est que les normes qu’il élabore, sont celles qui sont normales dans une communauté nationale à prédominance juive.”

<sup>48</sup> “Réflexions sur l’assimilation” (ca. 1949): “La lutte contre l’assimilation dans la mesure où elle doit sauvegarder l’essentiel du judaïsme coïncide donc avec la lutte pour les valeurs traditionnelles du judaïsme, qui implique la connaissance de son passé, pour la dignité juive, pour la survie de la communauté juive, incarnation d’une expérience de culture et d’un message d’une portée universelle unique dans l’histoire de l’humanité.”

<sup>49</sup> Although I do not know yet where Perelman gave this lecture, I believe it was most likely the ULB, as Perelman stresses its motto, “*scientia vincere tenebras*.” His notes are just that, written in bits of phrases rather than in complete sentences; as a result, I will include excerpts within parenthesis in the main body of the text.

he draws out how universalism and rationalism lead to the assimilation Jews, particularly those who were educated. He invokes Moses Mendelssohn's advice to "be Jewish at home, and a man in the street" ["sois Juif à la maison et homme à la rue"], and in very vivid language, describes rationality under the realm of assimilation as like a Japanese person abandoning his kimono: ["comme au Japon, le rationalisme s'habille à l'Européenne et abandonne sa tenue de kimono"] (5).<sup>50</sup> The bulk of Perelman's lecture thus sketches out how the Enlightenment and the French Revolution offered Jews only the possibility of assimilating and denying their Judaism. He thus overtly ties assimilation to "anti-Judaism," the term with which he describes Voltaire and Diderot: the Jews were able to be equal, he writes, "on the condition that they ceased being different" ["Egaux, à condition de cesser d'être différents"].

Notably, his conclusion in this lecture hinges precisely on the notion of Judaism as different. In fact, Perelman points to traditional Jewish values emphasizing the well-being of all humanity; he invokes the originality of a rationalist Judaism that, unlike the ideals of the French Revolution, does not require a break with the past.<sup>51</sup> Perelman's conclusion not only promotes pluralism, then, but also prods the Jews of both Israel and the diaspora to open up toward the universal. If he warns that Jewish thinkers can no longer neglect the social and political realities of Israel, he nevertheless reminds them that Jews have a particular responsibility to develop the instances of natural solidarity they so value on a universal scale ("Partir de l'humanisme des solidarités naturelles, les développer à l'échelle universelle"). If this lecture confirms the tie of assimilation to the French Revolution, it reverses the requirement that all rational Jews should be forced to abandon their differences and their particularities in order to be included within the ideal of universalism. Indeed, here Perelman argues that all rational Jews should use their values, especially the Jewish value of solidarity, in order to benefit humanity as a whole.<sup>52</sup> Assimilation seems to have once again been reshaped in this lecture, for Perelman calls the historical moment propitious for Jews of Israel and of the diaspora both to open towards the diaspora, and into universalism ("Situation historique particulièrement favorable. Israël et diaspora s'ouvrant vers diaspora, s'ouvre vers l'universel").

This lecture is the last work that I have thus far found in which Perelman dwells at length on the notion of assimilation; it offers us, then, something of a lesson with which I would like to conclude. But first, what exactly have we learned from this diachronic survey of Perelman's thought on assimilation? This lecture of 1962, like the essays before it, establishes how for decades Perelman (alone and with Olbrechts-Tyteca) carefully attended to the ideals of rationalism and universalism inherited from the Enlightenment and the French Revolution, acknowledging and condemning their anti-Semitic bases and consequences, all the while insisting upon their potential for pluralism and nuance. This lecture, with the earlier essays and even the understated *Traité*, also makes evident how assimilation is an important (if at times veiled) touchstone for the rhetorical theory of the *Traité* and the NRP broadly speaking. Further, this lecture, like the other essays, reveals how Perelman's thoughts on assimilation were very much anchored in their respective time and space, and thus respond to specific historical contexts and even changing personal ideologies.

What is most striking, and most significant about this lecture, however, is how Perelman ties the identity of Judaism as a social group to a universalism stripped of its anti-Semitism. If in 1935, Perelman partially dissociates assimilation from anti-Semitism, offering Jews the possibility of choosing a new form of being in the world and an assimilation of their own making, in 1962, his view of assimilation has evolved: he calls his readers to a dynamic and even lived experience of rhetorical dissociation in which assimilation is no longer simply marked by, and Zionism is no longer simply a response to, anti-Semitism. The Judaism of Israel and the diaspora alike, he declares, is endowed with universal and humanistic values; its contributions are universal in nature. To say that the NRP responds to anti-Semitism is, then, to recognize Perelman as engaged—philosophically and personally—not only in the dilemma of assimilation, but also in its creative and dissociative reinvention.

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<sup>50</sup> See Altmann on Mendelssohn's notion that Judaism was not in conflict with the secular state (465-468). Arendt calls Mendelssohn's assimilation "genuine," and remarks that "...Mendelssohn stressed above all else the isolation of each individual in being able to think for himself ("The Enlightenment and the Jewish Question," in *The Jewish Writings* 3, 10).

<sup>51</sup> Perelman may be responding here to Mendelssohn's and G.E. Lessing's different ways of seeing history and rationalism. See Arendt's account in "The Enlightenment and the Jewish Question" in *The Jewish Writings*.

<sup>52</sup> In this Perelman anticipates the recent argument of Jonathan Sacks, who proposes that two issues— identity without universality, and its opposite, universality without identity—must be addressed in order to stem religious violence. See especially 39-43.

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