

7

ENLIGHTENMENT
AND DIASPORA:
THE ARMENIAN AND
JEWISH CASES

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INTRODUCTION:
ENLIGHTENMENT AND DIASPORA:
THE JEWISH AND ARMENIAN CASES

David N. Myers and Richard G. Hovannisian

The present volume emerged out of a conference held at the University of California, Los Angeles, in November 1995. Inspired by Benjamin Braude's imaginative vision, we sought to assemble a distinguished and diverse group of scholars to address the comparative historical paths of Jews and Armenians in absorbing and disseminating the values of the Enlightenment. It was our conscious aim, both in organizing the conference and publishing this volume, to challenge conventional assumptions about the Enlightenment movement in Central and Western Europe. After all, the standard intellectual history of modern Europe often marginalizes groups such as the Jews and, more so, the Armenians—at once deemed part of and yet peripheral to the European world. While there is a burgeoning literature on the Jewish Enlightenment or *Haskalah* movement, the studies that comprise it are only slowly being woven into the fabric of Enlightenment history. The case of the Armenians is even more problematic in that it is much more difficult to draw clear intellectual or sociological boundaries around a discretely Armenian "Enlightenment movement." And yet, the historical experience of Armenians in Europe, India, and elsewhere offers a most instructive example of the process of accommodation between traditionalist and modernizing currents in the Enlightenment period. Of particular interest in this regard is the community of Armenian merchants in Madras, discussed in Vazken Ghougassian's paper in this volume, or the Mekhitarist monastic order in Europe, each of which developed a strong reformist and indeed quasi-Enlightenment orientation in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

The essays presented in this volume seek not only to explore the relationship between the Enlightenment and diaspora or transnational communities such as the Jews and Armenians; they reflect the first tentative steps toward a meaningful and informed scholarly conversation on the comparative history of Jews and Armenians. Although most of the papers do not engage in direct comparative work, their mere assembly here represents raw material for the next phase of scholarly labor. Indeed, an ever expanding body of comparative scholarship, some quite serious, has already been undertaken on the Armenian Genocide and the Holocaust. We believe much work still remains to be done on the shared historical experience, constant cultural mediation, and adaptability of these two diaspora communities whose occasionally overlapping paths demonstrate a remarkable ability to respond creatively to crisis.

What the papers in this volume do offer is a sustained engagement with a number of important and illuminating topical themes. The first important theme—addressed in the essays of Boghos Levon Zekiyian, David Sorkin, Vahé Oshagan, and Shmuel Feiner—is the relationship between traditional religious sensibilities and new Enlightenment values. Both the Armenian and Jewish cases affirm that the Enlightenment was a diverse enough philosophical and cultural movement to embrace not only critics of established religions, but those intent on fortifying the foundations of religion as well. Given the centrality of religious identification to both groups, the encounter with the universalist sensibility and novel educational ideals of the Enlightenment was often cautious and spasmodic. Advocates of enlightenment or reform had to balance delicately the impulse to adapt and survive in a modern world and the desire to preserve the bonds of communal identity.

The particular diaspora character of Armenians and Jews complicated this task. However, one important vehicle through which new ideas were transmitted throughout the diaspora, and older ones revitalized, was commerce. Indeed, the relationship between Enlightenment and commerce represents a second important theme addressed in our volume. Armenians and Jews alike developed reputations, and with good historical reason, as economic middle-men from late antiquity to the modern age. Each group established far-reaching economic networks which not only resulted in a relatively high degree of affluence, but also reinforced familial and broader social affiliations. Moreover, these economic channels became, as Vazken Ghougassian, Mordechai Zalkin, and Father Zekiyian show in their papers,

pipelines for Enlightenment values and ideals in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

A final theme that circulates throughout this book is the triangulated relationship among Enlightenment, diaspora, and nationalism. Benjamin Braude and Marc Nichanian interrogate this complex relationship, inquiring whether the Enlightenment somehow served to forge a distinct sense of *national* identity for Jews and Armenians. This theme is of particular importance in our current intellectual age in which "diasporism" has become a guiding metaphor for the hybrid identities of ceaselessly mobile, transnational groups. It is not our aim to reclaim the term "diaspora" for the Jews and Armenians. Rather, we believe that these two groups present interesting paradigms for the ongoing bifurcation and reformation of identity that occurs when geographic borders are traversed. Furthermore, we believe that the papers in this collection both enrich and complicate our understanding of the very idea of diaspora itself, in ways that will be of benefit to students of the Enlightenment and nationalism, as well as of groups other than Jews and Armenians who have been characterized by the term diaspora.

It is a pleasure to acknowledge the assistance of those who made publication of this volume possible. It was Benjamin Braude who first conceived of and followed through on the idea for a conference of this nature. Were it not for the enthusiastic support, both intellectual and institutional, of Professor Peter Reill, Director of the UCLA Center for Seventeenth- & Eighteenth-Century Studies and the William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, the conference would not have been so successful. We are also indebted to Candis Snoddy of the Center for her generous and efficient labors.

Transforming these diverse conference papers into publishable essays was at times challenging. Fortunately, we had the services of Stephanie Chasin, who discharged her editorial tasks with customary intelligence and dedication. Simon Payaslian patiently assisted at the computer.

We also thank the Armenian Educational Foundation Chair at UCLA and the UCLA Center for Jewish Studies for co-sponsoring the conference and bringing this volume to fruition in the series on Near Eastern Culture and Society, published under the auspices of the G. E. von Grunbaum Center for Near Eastern Studies at UCLA. To all the individuals and institutions who have assisted us, we are deeply appreciative.

IV

COMMENTARY

David N. Myers

The intellectual framework of this collection of essays complicates, in a productive way, conventional assumptions about the Enlightenment movement in Central and Western Europe. Indeed, the standard intellectual history of modern Europe, as well as the story of the relationship between Enlightenment and the rise of European nationalism, routinely ignores the experience of groups such as the Armenians and Jews—at once part of and removed from the European world. But precisely at the moment that the Enlightenment, as historical phenomenon and philosophical foundation, is undergoing intense critical scrutiny, so too the idea of diaspora has been subjected to scholarly attention and reformulation, particularly among diverse representatives of what has come to be known as post-colonial studies. The convergence of these two currents of critical thought makes propitious, and perhaps mandates, a discussion of the relationship between Enlightenment and diaspora.

That it is the Armenians and Jews who occupy our attention seems quite appropriate. Comparisons between the two groups have often been intimated, though rarely pursued with rigor and depth. In the past, it was the shared experience of genocide that dominated comparisons between the two groups. Here, our emphasis is quite different: it is not the struggle for physical survival, but rather the ongoing confrontation and negotiation between an imagined sense of group identity and a wider political, social, and cultural world. This process of confrontation and negotiation seems especially typical of those extra-territorial groups or communities labeled diaspora. Whereas Jews and Armenians have traditionally qualified as such, there has been a proliferation of recent scholarship expanding the class of diaspora groups to include Filipinos, Indians, Africans, and Chi-

canos, to name but a few. These essays attest to a desire to re-appropriate the term diaspora—not, I would wish, as an object of exclusive possession, but in the hope of gaining new insights into the diaspora experience.

This mission has been rendered somewhat problematic by the fact that there is, in some of the essays, a certain reserve in embracing the term diaspora. In his sweeping and learned programmatic essay, Benjamin Braude attempts to identify a seismic shift in the attitudes of Jews and Armenians to their respective homelands. Animating Braude's efforts is the impulse to correct the distortions of what he calls "nation-state historiography," which succumbs to what we might designate "terro-centrism" based on the essential criterion of homeland in defining nationhood. In Braude's view, the roots of this terro-centrism, and apparently, the distortions of nation-state historiography, actually lie in the Enlightenment. For it was the Enlightenment that "reinvented *Galut*," that tightened the bond, perhaps the noose, between nation and homeland. I hasten to add that a far more intuitive claim, at least in the Jewish case, would be that nationalism "reinvented *Galut*." The question must thus be asked: what in the Enlightenment led to the reinvention of the notion of exile and its frequent, though mistaken, terminological partner, diaspora? Or what is the nexus between Enlightenment and nationalism in this respect?

We do not receive altogether clear answers to these questions, though Professor Braude does hint at the following causal chain: around the Enlightenment, religion—treated as something of a holistic essence—confronts the forces of modernization and secularization, leading to its transmutation into faith, a less comprehensive package of beliefs and practices. The resulting triumph of "faith over religion created a vacuum," an open space for faithful and faithless—distinct from religious in Braude's lexicon—in which territorial nationalism began to compete for and then gain adherents. It was through this process that a new and powerful yearning for the "native" homeland surfaced, at which time the twinning of exile and diaspora as negative expressions of extra-territoriality was canonized.

In alluding to this causal chain, Braude explicitly follows Salo Baron's charge to rethink the Manichean divide between medieval and modern Jewish history, between the Dark Ages and the age of splendid light. Like Baron, Braude, in his call for "dispersion" history, aims to remove a certain stigma attached to the notion of diaspora. Not only should its association with exile be overcome, but its pre-Enlightenment history should

be understood on its own terms and not denigrated or reduced to desperate yearning for liberation so as to support the ideological demands of modern nationalists. Indeed, pre-Enlightenment dispersion history has its own integrity. What exactly that integrity is remains murky. Braude posits that this integrity was neither political nor territorial. But he does speak of a process of "extra-territorial nation-building." Is this parallel to Baron's revalorized ghetto in "Ghetto and Emancipation?" Or to Simon Dubnow's autonomist projections into the Jewish past? What does nation really mean in this context? Is it equivalent to that idea of religion which was transformed into faith with the advent of Enlightenment? If so, the model may not apply to the Armenian case, since Braude repeats on several occasions that the Armenian dispersion experience was less reliant on a religious-spiritual tie than on a demographic tie to its homeland.

It is Braude's argument that Enlightenment (re)invents *Galut*, and thereby enables the nationalist denigration of diaspora. I would propose a different trajectory for the relation between Enlightenment and diaspora. Rather than lead inexorably to a totalizing nationalism that demonizes dispersion, the Enlightenment can be seen, at least in the Jewish case, as appreciative of the unique properties of diaspora existence. That is, it acknowledges and validates the dynamic interaction—while also complicating the boundaries—between "internal" and "external" cultural currents, those currents which have continually made and remade Armenian and Jewish history. In this respect, it strikes me that a figure such as Joseph Emin, straddling the cultural poles of Armenian Christianity and Turkish Islam, could easily be seen as an Enlightenment hero. To take this a step further, it is precisely the lack of resolution, or conversely, the blurring effect of Enlightenment cultural ecumenism, that has created the modern Jewish condition in the West, the normative diaspora experience (as opposed to the nation-state experience that reacts against it). And it is this blurring effect that has led scholars recently to speak of the creative potential, the ceaselessly dynamic mix of cultural vectors, inhering in the diaspora condition. Undeniably, the diaspora idea today extends far beyond the classic cases of the Armenians and Jews. Instead of lamenting this, I believe that the new discourse of diaspora, and particularly the idea of cultural hybridity that stands at its center, can be of great help in rethinking the Armenian and Jewish experiences in modernity.

Like Braude, Marc Nichanian, in his stimulating and suggestive paper, is intrigued by the triangulated relationship of Enlightenment, diaspora,

and nationalism. However, the prism through which he examines this relationship is quite different from that of Braude. That is, Professor Nichanian is interested in identifying, following Peter Reill, a "crisis of historical conscience" in Armenian intellectual life. When did a modern Armenian historiography emerge? What did it look like and what were the consequences for Armenian collective memory? The formulation of these questions is indebted to Yosef Yerushalmi's seminal *Zakhor*, which posited a rupture in Jewish historical consciousness shortly after the Enlightenment. Unlike the Jewish case, Armenian history prior to the Enlightenment knew of a long tradition of historical writing, most notably represented by the legendary Movses Khorenatsi. However, an important shift in historical thought occurred in the wake of the Enlightenment. At that point, the genre of "Universal History," derived directly from German historical circles, began to penetrate Armenian historiography, suggesting movement towards a new critical spirit in historical recounting. The presence of this spirit is evident in the historian Gaterjian, who published a two-volume *Universal History* in the mid-nineteenth century (and whose chronological proximity and proclivity for German historicism summon up the memory of Heinrich Graetz). An even more compelling figure for Nichanian is Mikael Chamchian, the late-eighteenth-century author of the three-volume *History of Armenians*. Chamchian's work stands at the cusp of a new era in Armenian historical thought, though it is not altogether clear on which side of the divide it lies. In Nichanian's account, Chamchian's history is "pre-critical" in method and content, not yet manifesting the interpretive rigor or mundane causality of Enlightenment historiography. And yet, Chamchian defies the overly facile image of a primitive pre-modern. Nichanian seeks to study the transitional status of Chamchian, noting his desire for "totalization" of primary sources. Though lacking a sharp analytical thrust, this desire for totalization nonetheless resembles the modern historian's instinct to be exhaustively inclusive with respect to evidence.

Chamchian's status as a transitional figure is related to the broader Armenian predicament. It is here that Professor Nichanian offers his own reservations about the applicability of the term diaspora to the Armenians. Diaspora, he suggests, implies "an elementary degree of liberty." In drawing on the case of the Jewish Enlightenment, he notes that diaspora implies the liberty through which a traditional society receives and absorbs a phenomenon that is overtly hostile to it at the outset. In what respect this pro-

cess connotes diaspora is never fully explicated. Nor is it clear whether the above descriptive account has any validity in the Jewish case. Indeed, it is hardly self-evident that traditional Jewish society "found the strength" to accept *Haskalah*. It might be more accurate to state that the *Haskalah* had to adopt strategies to contend with traditional rabbinic authority until the "plausibility structure" of that authority, to borrow Peter Berger's term, collapsed. Indeed, if the idealized model of mediation of tradition and innovation is applicable at all, it would seem to be to the Armenian Mekhitarists. Did not this monastic order, and Chamchian, engage in that mediation? Nichanian avers that the Mekhitarists were geographically and culturally severed from—or "external" to—the majority of Armenians in the world who were "subjugated" in the Ottoman Empire. What were the consequences for the Mekhitarists or Chamchian? Were they any less committed to the work of mediation or less influenced by the work of *Aufklärung* historians? On another plane, does subjugation necessarily imply the absence of diaspora? As a matter of fact, according to a traditional rabbinic dictum, the end of Diaspora, and the resulting restoration of the Messianic kingdom in the Land of Israel, is inextricably linked to the end of political subjugation.

While relating the changes in historical thinking introduced by the Enlightenment, Nichanian might have given a fuller sense of how these changes were received beyond limited circles of intellectuals. In that way, a clearer connection could be drawn between the practice of history and the formation of memory in the modern Armenian experience.

Last but not least, Father Levon Zekiyan offers an illuminating description and periodization of the Armenian Enlightenment from the pre-Rebirth phase to the Humanist era to the age of full secularization. Zekiyan carefully notes the interactive and overlapping forces of print, capitalism, language, and culture in this process. At times, his narrative has something of a triumphalist tone to it, as if Armenian culture progressively moved toward higher states of fulfillment until the catastrophic Genocide. I was reminded of Burckhardt's celebratory prose when I read of the emancipation of women in the *Zartonk* period. Likewise, Zekiyan's assertion that the development of the Armenian question during the *Zartonk* period was fully consonant with "the requirements of a truly democratic society" borders on the utopian. However, I was struck by Zekiyan's language in describing "Armenization." It was not mere mimicry of established models; rather, Armenians "integrated and harmonized them

[non-Armenian models] in new and often brilliant syntheses." Notwithstanding the florid language and Father Zekiyan's own reticence in using the term "diaspora," an important point has been made here; it is the dynamic tension and struggle to preserve corporate integrity without surrendering to segregation that defines the paradigmatic diaspora experience—here understood more as a cultural condition than a geographic location. Moreover, I would suggest in closing that it was the Enlightenment which alternately validated and exacerbated the underlying tensions of the diaspora experience for both Jews and Armenians, thereby assuring a close and complicated relationship between Enlightenment and diaspora.